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MUSEUM | FUTURES



# Museum | Futures

Edited by

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*Klaus-Dieter Lehmann*

## The Museum of the Future

Translated by Judith Rosenthal

The Goethe-Institut and its partners in many parts of the world have already been exploring the topic of the museum of the future and its role in society for quite some time. In South America the project goes by the name of “Museum Episodes”, in Southeast Asia and the Pacific “Transitioning Museums in Southeast Asia”, in India “Museum of the Future” and in Africa “Museum Conversations”. The Goethe-Institut has moreover organized conferences on the future of European museums. These activities have all been shaped by the notion that, rather than treating the past as a closed chapter, we should view it as our historical obligation towards the future. The participants also agreed on the importance of assigning museums a key role as places of education and learning whose purpose is to convey knowledge across the generational spectrum while at the same time fulfilling social functions.

It was not long, however, before we realized that, in our day and age, the museum will not bear up against normative investigation, an insight reflected in the contributions to this book. We came to understand that the museum can also be its very opposite, and that, in the future, especially in global comparison, museums will have to function as publicly accessible places of contradiction if they are to build responsible relationships to their respective societies. The longing to hold the utmost authority when it comes to recognizing and defining the “big picture” is presumably unfulfillable, and ultimately not worth striving for.

The museum originated as an invention of European modernity, a legacy of the European Enlightenment and, for the people, an important development towards a new self-confidence. Museums were temples of education and places that served the development of mankind. In colonial times, the European powers also established these notions in

the countries under their control. There, museums served the purposes of European dominance.

The museum has meanwhile undergone a significant change of meaning, in Europe and the world. In Europe, we meanwhile associate traditional museums with terms like “conventional” and “stuffy”. In the former colonial countries, time has passed them by, and new developments in society call for new mirrors of society. The present-day curators in those countries are critical of the collections and their presentations, as is the public. The meanwhile potent colonialism debate also has repercussions for European museums – not only on account of unresolved ownership issues, but also because of the discriminatory conception of art and ethnographic objects. Both ethnological and universal museums are called into question.

To the extent that European societies are changing, so is the European model of the museum. It is becoming more diverse and more emotional, and the previously quite formal approach to acquainting the public with art is becoming more open and more surprising, and developing alternative processes

- for bringing together aspects and objects that otherwise do not intersect
- for providing access from the perspective of the present
- for enabling a different understanding of culture through receptiveness to different actors
- for offering new viewpoints through relationships between the familiar and the disturbing

As documented in this publication, the museums of India, South America, Africa and the Pacific have long outgrown their role as passive recipients of ideas and themselves become active idea generators. No longer a product of the Enlightenment, the new museum manifests the notion of emancipation. Yet even here, there is no standard model. Each museum has been shaped by its own respective social and historical environment and, by way of its autonomy, must represent cred-

ibility as a place of the mind and the society. It is a place of action, dialogue and life, a museum without walls that involves the street, its people and their questions and experiences, a social space that incorporates the cultural techniques specific to its surroundings, a forum and switching point of social change! A museum's substance and how it presents that substance are two entirely different matters. The museum is ultimately a transitory institution. To maintain its significance, it will have to undergo new interpretation by every new generation.

That is why it was the right decision not to limit this volume to a single cultural region, but to examine the issue of the museum from a cross-regional standpoint. It is with a diversity of voices that museums perceive their purpose in a world as fragmented as it is globalized. There is no single universal formula, but a wide range of different museum initiatives and structures.

The discussion series in India accordingly took its orientation from the museum's position as a public space. What can the purpose of the museum be in relation to civil society and the emancipated citizen? Menke and Emmerling explore these questions. The contributions by Franke and Sengupta look at issues of freedom and education. The texts by Ahuja and Mukherji focus on the specific situation in South Asia, for example the impact of the caste system. The pieces by Castro and Beltz concentrate primarily on the function of the ethnological museum.

The museum as an instrument of political activism is but one aspect of the Indian contributions as compared to those from South America and Africa. The latter testify to a far greater scepticism towards the museum as a colonial and capitalist institution. Issues of restitution play a major role everywhere except India, where the museum institution despite its colonial roots has evolved into multifarious formats that defy easy categorisation.

The museological concepts clearly favour participation over expertise, call for the involvement of marginalized groups as a driving force of the museum's activities and advocate partisanship in political controversy.

The grand and imposing universal museum has given way to the flexible, mobile museum of everyday life operated by its own community, a museum of that community's passions, fears and dreams. Digitality plays a role everywhere and is seen as a means of broadening the museum's basis and extending its reach.

Together, the contributions to this volume form a compendium that – with its diversity of ideas, concepts and examples – provides insights into the possibilities of a museum of the future, conveys pragmatic suggestions and critically identifies risks and bad decisions. It resolutely avoids ideological standpoints, is captivating by virtue of its openness and demands an end to intellectual colonialism.

The Goethe-Institut has shown that it can use its resources and its expertise to set a joint process of discovery in motion, a process capable of providing opportunities for public debates involving young people in particular, for reliable networks in planning processes, for intelligent alliances between different disciplines and for open and independent discourse.







*Leonhard Emmerling*

# The Museum as Arena

Translated by Matthew Partridge

## INTRODUCTION

In a publication concerned with the future of the museum and/or the museum of the future one should rightly expect not only to find texts that descriptively analyse the current state of affairs, but also texts that articulate expectations and hopes, maybe even wishful thinking. The following text belongs to the latter category. Its purpose is to demonstrate why museums as educational institutions could also be emancipatory institutions, and why this claim to a particular degree applies to art museums. I wish to proceed first by seeking to show to what extent talk of the emancipatory potential of the museum as an institution can be explained by the Humboldtian concept of education, in which education (*Bildung*) is distinguished from the impartation of instrumental knowledge. Furthermore I will illustrate why, more particularly, aesthetic experience offers the means of fulfilling the promise of this educational concept. This is not intended to lessen the value of museums of history, technology or science; rather, to assert that museums of art facilitate a specific kind of experience. They present works of art – rather than documents – to which the individual responds with aesthetic judgement, and it is the specific quality of aesthetic judgement – namely, that of being reflective and ceaseless – that enables the individual to achieve a consciousness of how she or he experiences the world. In other words, how one arrives at knowledge of oneself and the world.

In the second section, I shall address the question as to how the distinction between human being and civic subject, on which Wilhelm von Humboldt based his theory of the state and of education, was in the further course of the nineteenth century and up until the present progressively replaced by the belief that as human beings, people are social subjects, and that the division between society and the individual can

no longer be maintained with the same vigour as Humboldt had proposed. This account is supported by the history of the transformation of the category of respect (beginning with Kant), which played a central role in Humboldt's thinking, into one of recognition. In the present, this is represented predominantly by Habermas's theory of individuation through socialisation and Honneth's theory of dialogically constructed subjective autonomy. In historical terms, the dissolution of the dichotomy between human being and citizen, human being and state, as mirrored in this process of transformation, goes hand in hand with the ascendancy of constitutional democracy. Its primary purpose is no longer to exercise authoritarian control but to protect the rights of the individual. Bourgeois society maintains predominance by enforcing the civil rights and liberties of the individual (Menke).

I allow myself this digression since it has a bearing on the range of possibilities the museum could be credited with. The emancipatory function ascribed to the institution of education is transformed from an antagonistic one to one that is agonal. The convergence of the subject with the societal realm and the central category of recognition that needs to succeed where the issue is about recognising otherness amplifies the specific potential of the museum as an educational institution, where aesthetic judgement stands paradigmatically for the manner in which the acquisition of empirical knowledge is intertwined with epistemological knowledge as to how knowledge is acquired. The subject who in aesthetic judgement experiences both the freedom and the ungroundability of this judgement, also experiences her/himself as unintelligible or intelligible, as familiar or Other to the same degree as she/he experiences the world. To grapple with the world is an inalienable precondition for the ability to grapple with oneself.

To conclude, the key characteristics of the critique of the museum as an institution will be briefly discussed before turning attention to the museum of the future.

## EDUCATION/BILDUNG

In seeking to envisage what the future holds it is sometimes helpful to cast our gaze a long way behind us – in my case, to 1792. This was the year when the young Wilhelm von Humboldt wrote a text that was to remain unpublished until after his death. It can be considered the founding text of a liberal theory of the state, proposing ideas that seek to define the boundaries of the state.<sup>1</sup> Central to this text and to his *Bildungsfragment* on education<sup>2</sup> is a concept that today is heavily charged: the concept of education or *Bildung* that precisely at that time in Germany played an eminently significant role in the formation of national civic identity.<sup>3</sup>

The notion of *Bildung* as the life-long process of self-cultivation or maturation as distinct from *Erziehung*, the acquisition of skills and instrumental knowledge through schooling, was established by authors such as the Earl of Shaftesbury<sup>4</sup> and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose *Émile, ou De l'éducation* (1762) made a great impact after the French Revolution, especially in Germany. Whereas Shaftesbury's contribution consisted in stripping the concept of education of its ballast of pietistic

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<sup>1</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen des Staates zu bestimmen* (1792). In English translation: "Ideas on the Constitutions of States, occasioned by the New French Constitution"; available online: <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/humboldt-the-sphere-and-duties-of-government-1792-1854> (last accessed: 04.05.2020). Cf. Dietrich Spitta, *Die Staatssidee Wilhelm von Humboldts*, Berlin, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Theorie der *Bildung* des Menschen" (1793), in: Gerhard Lauer (ed.), *Wilhelm von Humboldt, Schriften zur Bildung* Stuttgart, 2017, pp. 5–12. In English (transl. Gillian Horton-Krüger): "Theory of *Bildung*", in: Ian Westbury, Stefan Hopmann & Kurt Riquarts (eds.), *Teaching as a reflective practice: The German Didaktik tradition*, Mahwah, New Jersey, 2000, pp. 57–61; available online: <http://blogs.ubc.ca/nfriesen/files/2015/01/Humboldt-on-Bildung.pdf> (last accessed: 04.05.2020).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Georg Bollenbeck, *Bildung Kultur. Glanz und Elend eines deutschen Deutungsmusters*, Frankfurt am Main, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, *Soliloquy or Advice to an Author*, London, 1710.

subjectivity and opening it up to secular application, Rousseau's enduring significance lies in having established, in keeping with his critique of culture and civilisation, a distinction between "human being" and "citizen". This forms the basis of the opposition voiced by educational apologists against purely utilitarian education that is solely interested in the transfer of useful knowledge in order to achieve qualification for practicing a future profession. This idea of "utilitarian" education was countered by an emphatic concept of *Bildung* that encompassed the entire human being and at the same time bore political connotations. What had previously been the privilege of the aristocracy – being in possession of sufficient time and leisure to appropriate knowledge beyond any immediate need of applied knowledge – was now being laid claim to by the emergent bourgeoisie in the throes of its emancipation from aristocratic domination.<sup>5</sup>

As a consequence, during the nineteenth century education was integrated into the overall emancipatory movement of the middle classes in their pursuit of political participation and consultation. Yet the fact that the present-day concept of education is weighed down by its baggage of a history of blinkered condescension, a narrow-minded conviction of the superiority one's standing, by racism and elitist arrogance is no longer possible to cast aside. In the wake of the founding of the German Reich the emancipatory spirit inherent to the concept of *Bildung* was suffocated by the self-importance of Germany's educated middle classes. In its desire to partake in the glory of the ascendant nation state, Germany's ambitious bourgeoisie first fraternised with the

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<sup>5</sup> Thus the account of a contemporary critic writing about Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* ("Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship", 1795/1796), for which literary scholarship coined the generic concept of the *Bildungsroman*: "Up to the present, in Europe only the nobleman was expected to pursue a continuous education of his entire person, particularly as is considered natural for his situation (...) In key with the growth of the middle classes in our times (...) there is a rise in the number of individuals among them who manifest a yearning for a complete personal education of the mind and of the body, and assert a claim to this." Christian Garve, *Über Gesellschaft und Einsamkeit*, Breslau, 1800, pp. 51–52 (Engl. transl. Matthew Partridge).

prevailing powers and then, with eminent thoroughness, succeeded in squandering this emancipatory spirit of education by hawking its services to barbarism. In the place of emancipation, exclusion became the purpose of education: awarding access to it was once more upheld as a privilege – but one now belonging to the bourgeois class. Like culture, education was given proprietary status: you possessed education like owning property and used it as an instrument of class-specific distinction. This still holds true today, where members of the educated middle classes brandish the arsenal at their disposal against nonconformist knowledge and heterodox or marginal forms of erudition. The debate over “leading culture” that for decades has been waged in a variety of guises throughout Europe cannot be considered as anything other than a farce led by the educated middle classes, in which snobbery is conflated with misogyny, homophobia and a pathological fear of all that is alien, with most dangerous consequences. Those who still defend the established canon may be living in cosy cahoots with their garden gnomes, followers and friends, but not with their eyes wide open in a globalised world.

This is why it is worth taking a closer look at the text of Humboldt’s ideas. Consensus holds that he was drafting a theory less about education than of the state. In this theory, whose overall scope is not our concern here, education nonetheless plays a very specific role. While maintaining the division between human being and citizen as established since Rousseau, Humboldt takes issue with the state’s tendency to educate the individual to be a citizen – in other words to be the object of state-governmental action. Instead, he proposes, education should aim to create a condition that allows the subject to “preserve his natural form without any sacrifice (...) Still the very object would be sacrificed which the association of human beings in a community was designed to secure. (...) Whence I conclude, that the freest development of human nature, directed as little as possible to ulterior civil relations, should always be regarded as paramount in importance with respect to the culture of man in society. He who has been thus freely developed should then attach himself to the State; and the State should test and compare itself, as it were, in him. It is only with such a contrast and conflict of

relations, that I could confidently anticipate a real improvement of the national constitution, and banish all apprehension with regard to the injurious influence of the civil institutions on human nature.”<sup>6</sup>

In Humboldt’s view, the state’s task is to give individuals the means of cultivating themselves up to a certain level within the framework of the state, offering them ample intellectual instruments to enter into “conflict” with the state whose purpose it is to defend and justify the constitution against criticism and demands of the individual. In other words, the state’s duty is to “train up” the civic subject to exercise criticism of the state, since only by means of antagonism between individual and state can the latter be modified and improved to the point of setting aside state interests to the benefit of the freedom of its citizens as individuals.

Humboldt rejected the demands of higher authority that the individual should be “tailored” to meet the considerations of power and exploitation. Instead he called for the state to confine itself solely to its protective function and otherwise encourage the individual’s development and elevation with the utmost possible freedom, even to the extent of fostering opposition to state interests. The factor that enables the individual to wage a struggle against the state is education; this, as Humboldt’s fragment on *Bildung* from 1793 argues, does not consist of an accumulation of instrumental knowledge. Its purpose, as the author writing in the tradition of Kant argues, should be “to achieve as much substance as possible for the concept of humanity in our person (...).<sup>7</sup> To conceive of the “humanity in one’s own person”, according

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<sup>6</sup> Humboldt, *Ideen...*, (as in fn. 1), p. 25. In English (transl. Joseph Coulthard, Jun.): Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Sphere and Duties of Government*, London, 1854; available online: [https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/589#Humboldt\\_0053\\_169](https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/589#Humboldt_0053_169) (last accessed: 4.5.2020).

<sup>7</sup> Humboldt, *Theorie der Bildung des Menschen* (as in fn. 2), p. 7. In English (transl. Gillian Horton-Krüger): “Theory of Bildung”, in: Ian Westbury, Stefan Hopmann & Kurt Riquarts (eds.), *Teaching as a reflective practice: The German Didaktik tradition*, Mahwah, New Jersey, 2000, pp. 57–61; available online: <http://blogs.ubc.ca/nfriesen/files/2015/01/Humboldt-on-Bildung.pdf>. Kant refers to the “Achtung der Würde der Menschheit in unserer Person”



to Humboldt, requires a person to grapple with the “world outside himself” by means of a third element that the individual may “bind it as tightly as he can to himself”.<sup>8</sup> But the purpose is always to achieve insight into one’s own action and thinking and to realise oneself as an autonomously acting subject with self-transparency: “In pure, ultimate terms, thought is never more than an attempt of the mind to be comprehensible to itself, whereas action is an attempt of the will to become free and independent in itself. Man’s entire external activity is nothing but the striving against futility.”<sup>9</sup>

What role is played by aesthetic experience in cultivating the individual to become this autonomous, emancipated subject which, “free and independent” and “comprehensible to itself”, is master of its own actions and its will? Allusions to this can be found in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (1790). Aesthetic judgement, which according to Kant is never an objective and determinative judgement but always only capable of being a subjective and reflective (and hence self-reflective) one, unfailingly and exclusively comes about through the subject in the presence of an individual work of art.<sup>10</sup> For this judgement to acquire general intersubjective validity it must be “required” from all human reason.<sup>11</sup> In this reflection upon the imagination of each individual one arrives at what Kant calls the “sensus communis”, common sense. It amalgamates the different many into a communality that precedes neither the judgement of the individual nor the “requirement” of an individual judgement, but instead is formed for the first time by means of this interminable process of comparison and reflection upon this comparison. It is precisely in the creation of the communality of the different many, in the freely formed community of citizens that Hannah Arendt saw the political potential of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*. In

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(Respect for the dignity of humanity in one’s own person), in: Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790), Stuttgart, 1963, §29, p. 180.

<sup>8</sup> Humboldt, loc. cit., p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. (Engl. transl. Gillian Horton-Krüger, *Theory of Bildung*, see: <http://blogs.ubc.ca/nfriesen/files/2015/01/Humboldt-on-Bildung.pdf>, p. 58.)

<sup>10</sup> Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §33, p. 199.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., § 8, p. 88.

her words: “Kant’s discovery of the public realm and plurality by reference to beauty. Yet manifested within beauty is the world: not humanity, but the world as inhabited by humanity.”<sup>12</sup> This world is the world shared by the different many: living in the world and talking about it, Arendt says, is essentially one and the same thing. It is manifested in the act of subjective judgement that is conscious of its preliminary character and anticipatively knows about the prerequisite multi-perspectivalism with which the work of art will ultimately be shown. To communicate about this world in a dialogue without any coercion, as an exchange among free subjects, is synonymous with political practice and the formation of community which is bound by common sense.<sup>13</sup> In other words, in the very fact that aesthetic judgement must always bear in mind the judgement of the Other, and that in the process of a subject’s reflection in view of itself and the Other no conclusive result can ever be achieved, Arendt perceived that particular factor that must be taken seriously as the political factor in Kant’s philosophy.

Aesthetic judgement is indeed not the result of sophisticated “reasoning contemplation”<sup>14</sup> but the formulation of a tentative judgement, which takes into consideration the possible contrasting opinion of the Other and necessarily brings this into comparison. In this respect, the confrontation between the individual and the aesthetic object, reaching a judgement and its comparison, as well as formulating a judgement of subjective generality as the foundation of a community, represent the model of political constellations and procedures. In this perspective, the aesthetic realm is the political realm.

Before we draw implications from this for the museum of the future I would like to elaborate on a specific aspect of Humboldt’s educational

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<sup>12</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Was ist Politik? Die Frage der Demokratie* (1983), edited by Ursula Ludz, Munich, 2015, p. 192.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 52. Cf. Claude Lefort, “Die Frage der Demokratie” (1983), in: Ulrich Rödel (ed.), *Autonome Gesellschaft und libertäre Demokratie*, Frankfurt am Main, 1990, pp. 291–297. Cf. Chantal Mouffe, *Das demokratische Paradox* (2000), Vienna, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Kant, loc. cit., § 39, p. 211.

concept and its historical afterlife. As already indicated, Humboldt derived the programme of incorporating the individual and humanity “in our person”, in other words the alliance of subjectivity and communality, particularity and universality, from the *Critique of Judgement*. According to Kant, subjective judgement, by virtue of being “required” from all humanity, becomes a judgement of subjective universality. Indeed, this is not simply a private opinion that closes itself to discussion but a judgement that has to stand the test of pro and contra scrutiny. This judgement pertains to the beautiful, which can be regarded as an indirect expression of moral goodness. In the same way as the morally good calls for everyone’s consent, the judgement relating to beauty can also claim general agreement simply because that which is beautiful indirectly symbolises that which is morally good.<sup>15</sup> Even if it cannot be translated into a determinative judgement, it inheres in aesthetic judgement that it strives to achieve a certain binding character. Beyond this, aesthetic pleasure is not simply sensual delectation but also includes the enjoyment of “aesthetic ideas”, or rather it positively presupposes them. Via the symbolisation of the morally good through what is beautiful, aesthetic ideas are coupled with “moral ideas”. The general requirement to show respect for these ideas means nothing other than to show “self-esteem (of the humanity within us)”.<sup>16</sup> To heed the law that “we as a necessity impose on ourselves”<sup>17</sup> is not the same as to respect the condition of heteronomy that necessarily encompasses the individual but is, *qua* respect for all that is generally human, respect for what is human in each respective subject, hence self-esteem. Although respect requires me to contain my self-love it does, however, connect me with the entirety of human reason since I – in what I am as much as what I am not – recognise the communality of the “humanity (within us)” in what is identical and in the Other. The relation of the respect connecting me to the Other, also implies respect for that which is not identical to myself, for that which is alien to me, for my

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., § 59, p. 308.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., § 54, p. 280.

<sup>17</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (1785), Stuttgart, 2000, p. 26.

counterpart or collocutor. In this correspondence there evolves a never-to-be-concluded dialectical interplay of identity and alterity based on the observation that difference is what I have in common with all the others. The *self* at the core of subjectivity is both the most universal of things and simultaneously that which distinguishes me from everything else.<sup>18</sup> Yet it was not Humboldt who was to draw the consequences from this paradigm of respect that he derived from Kant: in order to more clearly define the boundaries of the state's powers of disposition he left intact the conventional division between human subject and citizen that allows the state and the individual to confront one another in a dynamic of mutual antagonism. It was Fichte and then Hegel who first remodelled Kant's category of respect into the category of recognition, situating it at the centre of their respective philosophies of morality and right,<sup>19</sup> before Marx then finally broke with the distinction between

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<sup>18</sup> Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Grundlinien aus der Philosophie des Rechts* (1820), *Werke in 20 Bänden*, vol. 7, Frankfurt am Main, 1986, p. 441, addendum.

<sup>19</sup> Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Grundlage des Naturrechts nach Principien der Wissenschaftslehre*, Leipzig, 1796, p. 38: "Keines kann das andere anerkennen, wenn nicht beide sich gegenseitig anerkennen: und keines kann das andere behandeln als ein freies Wesen, wenn nicht beide sich gegenseitig behandeln." In English (transl. Michael Baur): "One cannot recognise the other if both do not mutually recognise each other; and one cannot treat the other as a free being, if both do not mutually treat each other as free.", in: Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre*, Cambridge, 2000. Cf. Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807), edited by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel on the basis of Hegel's works from 1832–1845, Frankfurt am Main, 1989, p. 147: "Jedes [Bewusstsein] ist dem Anderen die Mitte, durch welche jedes sich mit sich selbst vermittelt und zusammenschliesst, und jedes sich und dem Anderen unmittelbares für sich seiendes Wesen, welches zugleich nur durch die Vermittlung so für sich ist. Sie *anerkennen* sich als *gegenseitig sich anerkennend*." In English (transl. Peter Fuss, John Dobbins): "Each [consciousness] is to the other the centre through which each brings into relation and connects itself with itself, and each is to itself and the other an immediate entity existing for itself, which at the same time is thus for itself only through this relating, or mediation. They *acknowledge* one another as *mutually*

individual and citizen: “But also when I am active *scientifically*, etc. (...) then my activity is *social*, because I perform it as a *man*. Not only is the material of my activity given to me as a social product (...) my *own* existence is social activity (...) Above all we must avoid postulating ‘society’ again as an abstraction vis-à-vis the individual. The individual is *the social being*.”<sup>20</sup> From here it is a logical step to associate individuation and socialisation<sup>21</sup> and to draw the conclusion that “autonomy is a relational, intersubjective entity, not a monological achievement. What helps us to acquire such autonomy (...) is fashioned out of living relations of reciprocal recognition (...).”<sup>22</sup>

This development of the category of respect into one of recognition goes hand in hand with the shaping of the democratic constitutional state in the modern era. In its modern form, the relationship between individual and state finds a far more complex form than that envisaged by Humboldt. The antagonism between state and subject has given way to a complex interaction surrounding the exercise, the claims to, the initiation and the negotiation of rights. The state’s activity is itself now substantially angled towards the emancipation of the individual

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*acknowledging one other.*” in: Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Notre Dame/Indiana, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Marx, Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte (1844), in: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, supplementary volume 1, Berlin, 1968, p. 538. (Highlights in the original). In English: “Private Property and Communism”, in: Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*; available online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm> (last accessed: 29.04.2020).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Jürgen Habermas, “Individuierung durch Vergesellschaftung”, in: Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, Frankfurt am Main, 1988, pp. 153–186. Cf. also from an anthropological perspective: Arnold Gehlen, *Moral und Hypermoral. Eine pluralistische Ethik* (1969), Frankfurt am Main, 2016, p. 47. Like Habermas, Gehlen also makes reference to H. G. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* (1934).

<sup>22</sup> Axel Honneth, “Das Gewebe der Gerechtigkeit”, in: Honneth, *Das Ich im Wir*, Frankfurt am Main, 2010, p. 62. In English (transl. by Joseph Ganahl): Honneth, *The I in We. Studies in the Theory of Recognition*, Cambridge, 2012.

and the protection of civil rights and liberties.<sup>23</sup> This has two consequences: firstly, the subject becomes the object of continual governmental activity, which needs to introduce new rights so as to offset the destructive impact on liberty of individual arbitrary actions undertaken in the name of previously established rights. Secondly, this governmental action which grants the subject certain rights, has produced this subject in the first place and continues to produce it as the subject that has rights, which it can mobilise against any excessive overreaching by the state. Hence, protecting the individual from the state is itself the result of state activity. “In other words, the state is constantly intervening in bourgeois society precisely in order to maintain it as a realm which it cannot govern.”<sup>24</sup> This state-mandated right enables the participants in social action themselves to reshape the norms to which they are subjected by demanding the formulation and institution of new civil liberties and asserting these rights against the state. “Bourgeois society is a society of authority simply because of and by dint of being a society of liberty.”<sup>25</sup>

Accordingly, as far as the relationship of the subject to the (modern constitutional) state is concerned one cannot describe it as antagonistic but as agonal. The state is both a partner as well as an opponent in the negotiation of individual rights and liberties, which it both restricts and vouchsafes, also including the right to remain unmolested by the state. Therefore, in regard to the constitutional state in the modern era it is also no longer valid to talk simplistically of power structures on the one hand, and, on the other, of the subject that as an object of state action is passively exposed to these structures. The citizen participates in society’s interactions and correlations, where autonomy cannot be understood as freedom from society and state intervention but merely as autonomy within society, as the acquisition of independent functional relations.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Christoph Menke, *Kritik der Rechte*, Berlin, 2015, p. 245.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 322. (Engl. transl. Matthew Partridge.)

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 268. (Engl. transl. M.P.)

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Niklas Luhmann, “Das Kunstwerk und die Selbstreproduktion der

The modern constitutional state grants – but also demands from – the subject a share and involvement in the processes that constitute the state. These processes are based on the category of reciprocal recognition among individuals and give rise to the interwoven occurrence of individuation through socialisation. If the museum is understood as a place of education – which is not to lessen our perception of its further functions related to archiving, research, documentation etc. – its inherent potential consists of its capacity to impart to the individual both an awareness of this individual’s competence to form subjective judgement vis-à-vis a respective aesthetic object, and a consciousness of the specific nature of the aesthetic object regarding which the subject feels summoned to form a judgement. In addition, by enabling the individual to confer intersubjective validity on this subjective experience and to liken this individual experience with the experience of other individuals – to “require” this comparison from others, as it were – the museum assumes a socially integrative task. If in turn education enables the individual as a legal person to participate in the constitution of the state, then education too can be ascribed systemic integrative functions. Hence, in terms of both aspects the museum can adopt a role as an educational institution. Aesthetic education as education of the subject endeavouring to become a world citizen and to understand her/his own mode of how she/he constructs their relationship to the world aims to emancipate the civic subject, who is governed by means of governing her/himself.

### CRITIQUES OF THE MUSEUM

Only a few years after Humboldt’s fragment, and just a few years after the first museums were founded as state-run establishments for educating citizens, the archaeologist and art writer Quatremère de Quincy compiled the first-ever museum review, which even today is still worth reading. In his “*Considérations morales sur la destination des ouvrages de l’art*” (Paris, 1815) he reproached the museum for stripping the

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Kunst”, in: Luhmann, *Schriften zu Kunst und Literatur*, Frankfurt am Main, 2008, p. 142.

exhibited works of their context and estranging them from their provenance, and of robbing them of all vitality and impact by displaying them within a simultaneity of wholly unrelated objects. All museums are capable of, he writes, is to conserve the artwork's materiality, but not its spirit: "Oui, vous y en avez transporté la matière; mais avez-vous pu transporter avec eux ce cortège de sensations tendres, profondes, mélancoliques, sublimes ou touchantes, qui les environnait? Avez-vous pu transférer dans vos magasins cet ensemble d'idées et de rapports qui répandait un si vif intérêt sur les oeuvres du ciseau ou du pinceau? Tous ces objets ont perdu leur effet en perdant leur motif." He concludes the chapter with the words: "Déplacer tous les monuments, en recueillir ainsi les fragments décomposés, en classer méthodiquement les débris, et faire d'une telle réunion un cours pratique de chronologie moderne; c'est pour une nation existante, se constituer en état de nation morte; c'est de son vivant assister à ses funérailles; c'est tuer l'Art pour en faire l'histoire; ce n'est point en faire l'histoire, mais l'épithaphe."<sup>27</sup>

What de Quincy is criticising can be summarised in several points: the exhibited works are deprived of their impact since the motif of their creation can no longer be deduced. They are transformed into documents of a chronology, by means of which one can write the history of art, but this happens by their reduction to mere material evidence of their time and at the cost of their spiritual content. And for this reason

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<sup>27</sup> Antoine-Chrysostôme Quatremère de Quincy, *Considérations morales sur la destination des ouvrages de l'art*, Paris, 1815, pp. 56–57. In English (transl. M.P.): "Yes, you have transported the physical material here. But have you also brought that procession of tender, deep, melancholy, sublime or touching feelings which once surrounded them? Have you been able to transfer to your galleries that ensemble of ideas and correspondences which spread such animated interest over the works executed by chisel or brush? All these objects lose their effect in losing their cause. (...) Moving all these monuments, gathering together all their decaying fragments, classifying their debris methodically, and claiming that this re-composition is a practical lesson in modern chronology is to make oneself into a dead nation for a living cause, is to attend one's funeral in one's lifetime. And to kill in order to write its history; yet this is not its history, it is its epitaph."



they can no longer fulfil their purpose of cultivating a vibrant nation. Instead, the present nation is being founded on a nation now defunct. It is witness to its own burial – and not only does the museum kill art in order to transform it into history but it even transforms this same history into a gravestone.

Hence de Quincy is attacking the museum at a very early stage of its development precisely for the educative function that the French state had allotted to it. Yet he is not criticising it because, say, by giving the museum the task of contributing to citizens' education through exhibitions of exemplary works of art, it is reducing the autonomy of art. Rather, he admonishes the museum for being unqualified to build a vibrant nation since it is no more than an accumulation of lifeless, spiritless material – the works in the museum are simply a collection of debris, dead people and spiritless material, he argues, because one can no longer read in them what once inspired their creation. The impossibility of reconstructing the context from which they arose determines their (ethical) debility.

To perceive a work of art as an aesthetic phenomenon presupposes that it can be viewed as an animate object. To perceive it as an animate object requires the possibility of an emotional response, of sentiment and an ability to relive the work with joy, passion, empathy or shared mourning, through which its vitality is restored. In de Quincy's view, aesthetic behaviour means emotionally responding to the power of art and the fulfilment of the idea of eternal beauty realised in each individual work of the artistic genius.<sup>28</sup>

Please allow me to digress briefly. On being offered the opportunity to be involved in the hanging of the Alte Galerie in Berlin, Humboldt himself refused to contribute to the transformation of art into history as was criticised by de Quincy. In his 1829 memoir he expressed preference for aesthetic perception over historical education, giving precedence to the aesthetic “pleasure of the individual work” above its

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 64, pp. 107–108.

educative function.<sup>29</sup> The full text leaves no doubt as to the normativity of classical and Renaissance art, citing the certainty of the masterpiece's self-communicating power to foil attempts to enforce a hanging concept based on art-historical criteria and categories. Humboldt's concern is with aesthetic experience and the possible effect of cultivating the human subject spawned by this experience: the experience of emancipation. De Quincy's protest against the transformation of art into history and Humboldt's belief in the superiority of "aesthetic pleasure" over historic instruction signal an attempt to safeguard the subject of aesthetic experience from the imposition of authoritarian order as a display of power. By virtue of the openness of its practice and of its outcome as an educational experience, aesthetic experience is an obstruction to the state's desire to assert order and power.

The observation emphasised by de Quincy – the museum as a place of death – is taken by Marinetti in his *Futurist Manifesto* of 20 February 1909 as an opportunity to call for the destruction of all museums.<sup>30</sup> Describing them as "cemeteries of wasted effort, calvaries of crucified dreams, registers of false starts", Marinetti wonders what the point is of pouring "our sensibility into a funeral urn instead of casting it forward with violent spurts of creation and action". Not only is it useless to venerate the past but also harmful. The unconditional will to be of the present and oriented towards the future, in whose cause not only the past but also everything that is weak and feminine must be sacrificed, no longer affords us the space to contemplate the past. Interestingly, Marinetti ascribes the museum an iconoclastic role when he describes

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<sup>29</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Bemerkungen zu Hrn. Dr. Waagens Aufsatz über die Principien der Gemälde-Aufstellung* (1829), cit. in: Christoph Martin Vogtherr, "Zwischen Norm und Kunstgeschichte. Wilhelm von Humboldts Denkschrift von 1829 zur Hängung der Berliner Gemäldegalerie", in: *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 34, 1992, pp. 53–64, here: p. 62. Cf. also Thomas W. Gaehtgens, "Altes Museum, Berlin: Building Prussia's first modern museum", in: Carole Paul (ed.), *The first modern museums of art*, Los Angeles, 2012, pp. 285–304.

<sup>30</sup> [https://www.societyforasianart.org/sites/default/files/manifesto\\_futurista.pdf](https://www.societyforasianart.org/sites/default/files/manifesto_futurista.pdf) (last accessed on 01.05.2020).

it as a “slaughterhouse” where painters combat one another – an idea revisited a hundred years later by Boris Groys when he reproaches the museum in general and the exhibition in particular for operating like an iconoclastic machine.<sup>31</sup>

Writing in a similar vein to Marinetti, the publicist Heinrich Pudor described museums in his essay *Museumsschulen* (Museum schools) in 1910 as cultural morgues suffused with a breath of decay rather than the “breath of life”<sup>32</sup>, claiming they made no contribution to shaping the present, let alone the future. In 1929, adopting the slogan of “the living museum”, the architectural theorist Siegfried Giedion countered this critique with a concept that still resonates today, one that is reflected in the aspirations of present-day museums of contemporary art to “show things while they are still moving and not to wait until they are laid to rest in a historical coffin.”<sup>33</sup>

A final testimony confirming that the critique first formulated by de Quincy resonated until well into the twentieth century is provided by Maurice Merleau-Ponty who wrote: “The museum gives us a false consciousness, a thief’s conscience. (...) We sense vaguely that something has been lost and that these gatherings of old maids, this silence of the grave and the respect of pygmies do not constitute the true milieu of art. So much effort, so many joys and sorrows, so much anger and labour were not destined to reflect one day the sad light of the Louvre museum. (...) The museum kills the vehemence of painting (...) It is

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/02/68504/politics-of-installation/> (last accessed on 01.05.2020). Marinetti was referring to the jealous behaviour of artists competing for wall space, while Groys sees the museum’s iconoclastic character in the context of Derrida’s notion of *pharmakon* as something that both cures the image and aggravates its illness. These differences should at least be mentioned if noting a parallel between the two.

<sup>32</sup> Heinrich Pudor, “Museumsschulen”, in: *Zeitschrift für Museumskunde* 6, 1919, pp. 248–253, here: p. 250.

<sup>33</sup> Siegfried Giedion, “Lebendiges Museum”, in: *Der Cicerone. Halbmonatszeitschrift für die Interessen des Kunstforschers & Sammlers*, 21, 1929, pp. 103–106, here: pp. 103–104.

the historicity of death. But there is a living historicity of which the museum offers only a broken image.”<sup>34</sup>

From the 1960s onwards, this criticism was displaced by Institutional Critique which examines the museum in terms of the degree to which prevailing social conditions of exclusion and disadvantage are reflected in the collecting and exhibition practices of the museum, in its accompanying rhetoric, its architectural layout and exhibition design. Questions as to whose voice(s) can or should legitimately be heard in which context and in reference to which object have in recent years acquired greater urgency and shifted the museum (or exhibition) into the focus of public awareness as a truly political space.<sup>35</sup>

Tony Bennett sees a parallel between the architectural layout of the classical museum of the nineteenth century and the panopticon of the prison, and hence a metaphor of control and discipline. He describes the museum as an epistemic machine in which objects and viewers are set in a preordained configuration or are arranged as a representation of political power to consolidate the respectively prevailing political and ideological order.<sup>36</sup> What the visitor savours as aesthetic experience, Bennett argues, is in reality a carefully constructed illusion through which the state almost imperceptibly grooms the visitor into a compliant citizen. It is precisely the experience of aesthetic pleasure, ostensibly freely elected and not steered by outside authority, that allows the subject to be integrated all the more deep-rootedly and enduringly into the framework of political and epistemic power.<sup>37</sup>

An analysis of the museum policies of the British colonial power in South Asia and the history of the museum as an institution, in both

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<sup>34</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La Prose du Monde* (1969). In English (transl. John O'Neill): *The Prose of the World*, Evanston, 1973, pp. 72–73.

<sup>35</sup> I am referring here to debates such as those surrounding Dana Schutz's painting *Open Casket* shown at the 2017 Whitney Biennial or the controversy about the paintings of the painter Balthus.

<sup>36</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, New York, 1995, e.g. p. 24.

<sup>37</sup> Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex”, in: *New Formations*, 4, 1988, p. 79.

colonial and post-colonial India, supports Bennett's views.<sup>38</sup> The intention was to integrate first the "colonial subjects", then national citizens who had non-violently struggled for their independence into their respective political settings and prepare them for their respective roles within the state. Whereas the British initially focused their civilising energies on the mission of elevating the uneducated masses to become fully paid-up members of the human race, the subsequent administration of independent India saw its duty in shaping the masses into bona fide citizens. In both processes the museum was to play a not insignificant role. Even as the general thrust changed over time, the museum's underlying educative function survived the transition from the colonial period to independence unaltered and unscathed.

Nonetheless, might one not ask if analyses like Bennett's perhaps suffer from a chronic disdain and underestimation of visitors' capacity for judgement? However true it might be that the architectural design of museums, their intrinsic classifications and hierarchisation of works and epochs together reflect underlying ideologies, by the same token the claim that the museum's sole *raison d'être* is to "condition"<sup>39</sup> or groom the citizen does not hold up. Museum visitors, even if only as customers, have long since abandoned the passivity and habitus of deference expected of them and now successfully claim their right to active involvement in the production of meaning and import of museum exhibits.

At the same time – which is why I explored the transformational history of the category of respect in the above in some detail – the individual can no longer be cast in blunt opposition to society and power. Any advocacy of this dichotomy of individual and society, even if from a critical perspective and with emancipatory intentions, would actually

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Saloni Mathur and Kavita Singh (eds.), *no touching, no spitting, no praying. The Museum in South Asia*, London/New York/New Delhi, 2015. Cf. also: Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories. Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, New York, 2004.

<sup>39</sup> Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, "Die Kunst von heute braucht kein Haus", in: *Die Zeit*, no. 13, 25.03.1999, p. 55.

represent a reversion to a rationale predating Marx. Essentialising the individual as a victim of social machinery intent on depriving the subject of its subjectivity is revealed as an all-too-smooth line of argument that not only defeats its purpose but also fails to meet the task of criticism: the dismissal of illusion.

If aesthetic education can be said to have an effect, then it is this: it can enable the individual to acquire a consciousness of the possibility of self-guided learning, which in turn allows her/him both to recognise and counteract these manipulative efforts – as detailed by Bennett et al. – and to turn these into the object of her/his own perception. By thus opposing these with her/his own ability to judge, the individual is transformed into an autonomous subject – autonomous as in the above-described sense of becoming an agent in a field of interdependencies and correlations. There is no reason why the so-called power structures and relations so often invoked should fundamentally elude recognition; indeed, they do not, as Bennett himself shows. Hence there is also no reason why the museum as a place of education in a Humboldtian sense – education to acquire knowledge of oneself and the world – should not also be the place where such conditions determining the museum's inner structure, the selection of exhibits and their hanging, the spatial disposition and the institution's place within society become recognisable and, consequently, open to criticism.

However, this does not mean that by implication all museums achieve the desired degree of participation on the part of their visitors. In fact many museums are deathly boring, dismal accumulations of artefacts, objects, documents and works, and are more indicative of curatorial cluelessness vis-à-vis the abundance of passed-down cultural assets, and of indifference and sheer irresponsibility than they manifest a purpose and passion for grappling with the history of these objects and their significance. In this respect, the manner in which a museum is run, how it treats its visitors, the degree of attention it pays to interaction and sharing knowledge is also always a measure of the overall condition of society. Where visitors are treated as unwelcome guests or bothersome supplicants who are whistled to order by uniformed atten-

dants the moment someone raises their voice to a volume of normal conversation and schoolchildren are brusquely frog-marched through the galleries without letting them catch their breath to ask a question, such circumstances echo a situation that can be observed outside the walls of the museum. Namely, that the state of social development has not evolved much further than what one might call post-feudal. But this is precisely the context in which talk of the emancipatory potential of the museum proves to be all the more urgent and founded.

### THE MUSEUM OF THE FUTURE/THE FUTURE OF THE MUSEUM

It is unlikely that the museum of the future will manage to invalidate one of de Quincy's central points of criticism: that the museum is cut off from social life. By necessity, museums, even the living museum envisaged by Giedion, will to some extent always be set apart from their social setting. They withdraw individual objects from the market, the place where goods and services are exchanged, in order to preserve them from attrition. The silence criticised by Merleau-Ponty is the silence of a place that vehemently strives to slow the passing of time. As such, then, the museum is less a site of death than a place where time is supposed to be brought to a standstill in a quest to elude death. Yet however one wishes to interpret this circumstance, it is inherent to the museum's logic that the one aspect that separates the work from the world – aesthetic difference – is translated into the form of separation from its social surroundings. Whenever the museum acts or is understood simply as an extension of general social relations of exchange and the exercise of power it falls short of fulfilling what could be its function. Namely, it ceases to be a place where education (qua *Bildung*) can be experienced, trained and practiced as an emancipatory process, where the struggle with the state can be exemplarily put to the test. Models are distinguished by the epistemological potential they offer since they manifest a difference to that which they are making reference to.<sup>40</sup> It then needs to be asked if, were the transgressive imperative that

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<sup>40</sup> Klaus Dieter Wüsteneck, "Zur philosophischen Verallgemeinerung and

currently shapes the discussion of modernity to become reality, would the heuristic value of art and, by association, of the institutions dedicated to conserving, exhibiting and mediating art still be maintained? Where nothing can be distinguished there is nothing more to discern.

In future, the view will one day prevail that education as an emancipatory development is not an optional luxury to be indulged in when economic prospects are more propitious but that cultural formation and school education represent indispensable prerequisites for a society's prosperity – and specifically in a manner that affords social mobility even to its weakest members by sharing society's affluence.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, it is the state's responsibility to promote and support institutions such as museums. Education is – and here we return to Humboldt's essential observations – a duty of the public sector and not the concern of private interests competing with one another over customers in a commercial market which cast off their responsibility the moment the market ceases to generate sufficient profit. But if the state wishes to successfully pursue its interest in socially and systemically integrating its citizens it will need to finance the institutions best placed to assume this task.

The museums of the future will cease to include ethnological museums. The wholly arbitrary distinction between museums of art and of ethnological artefacts, between museums of Far Eastern or Egyptian or Indian culture, on the one hand, and ethnological collections con-

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Bestimmung des Modellbegriffs", in: *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 11 (1963), pp. 1504–1523; here: pp. 1522–1523. "Ein Modell ist ein System, das als Repräsentant eines komplizierten Originals auf Grund mit diesem gemeinsamer, für eine bestimmte Aufgabe wesentlicher Eigenschaften von einem dritten System benutzt, ausgewählt oder geschaffen wird, um letzterem die Erfassung oder Beherrschung des Originals zu ermöglichen oder zu erleichtern beziehungsweise um es zu ersetzen." In English (transl. M.P.: "As the representation of a complex original, a model is a system that due to characteristics that are essential for a certain purpose that is shared with the original, is used, chosen or created by a third system so as to enable the latter to ascertain or assume control of the original or to facilitate or to replace it."

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, New Delhi, 2000.



serving and exhibiting “tribal” objects, on the other, will prove untenable. This is not because everything is supposedly the same; not because everything can be integrated within a fundamentally assimilative, hence also repressive notion of Western art; not because, following the modern transgressive imperative, everything that had previously been excluded from the category of art should now also be granted aesthetic appreciation – paving the way for common exhibition halls for works, objects and artefacts from all corners of the world. But it is because, gradually, the view is gaining ground that the Other has its equivalent in the Self, that the Self also has a parallel in the Other; that recognition of the Self is only possible in reference to the Other, and that the Other is common to all and is that which connects all the different many with each other. If the above observations about respect and recognition maintain a lasting effect then the awareness will prevail that the Self is simply the Other from a different perspective: namely, what constitutes us is not that which is identical to us.

The museums of the future where all the world’s art will be at home will not be global museums, even less so universal museums. All attempts to tell stories of a parallel, alternative, different or eccentric modernity<sup>42</sup> will fail because the term “modernity” will finally prove to have been utterly incongruous for telling the history of art that is both meaningful and equal to the task. No longer will arduously stitched-together narratives or fitfully argued conceptual brackets squeeze collections or exhibitions into a corset that had always been too narrow for the works. The museums of the future will be museums of difference. Neither comparable nor unparalleled, in their differentiation works will call for the exertion of an aesthetic judgement that is conscious of its ungroundability. For precisely this reason it needs to be “required” of human reason for that “sensus communis” to be grounded which as the basis for political activity as practice will serve the free and different many.

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Susanne Gaensheimer, Kathrin Beßen, Doris Krystof inter alia (eds.), *Museum Global. Mikrogeschichten einer ex-zentrischen Moderne*, exhib. cat. Sammlung NRW, Düsseldorf, 2018/19.

Christoph Menke

## The Experiment of Freedom

What is the role of public institutions for the presentation, reception and discussion of the arts in society? In my paper I want to defend the claim that we should think about this role from the perspective of the significance of the arts for the achievement of freedom: the public institutions for the presentation of art are—or should be—institutions of liberation. This term and claim seem paradoxical: we normally think of liberation as an individual achievement and of institutions as agents of rule and normalization. However, if we think of liberation from the perspective of art, it necessarily involves a trans-individual dimension: liberation cannot be *done* or *made* by an individual agent. Rather, it takes place in a process that goes beyond the individual and thereby transforms it. Liberation is the name of process between the individual and its other. It therefore needs challenges and opportunities that are provided from outside.

I will try to defend this view in three steps. The first step is a clarification of the idea of liberation: what does it mean to understand freedom as a process (and hence not as state or condition) and how is such a process of liberation possible? I will address these questions by drawing on Hegel's radical theory of *Bildung* (education or subject-formation in the broadest sense) as liberation. In the second step, I will try to clarify the role of the arts, of aesthetic experience, in the becoming of freedom. Here, I will sketch the thesis, that this role of the arts can be best analyzed by the idea of experimentation. I will come back to my question in a brief final step in which I will try to indicate why it follows from this that the role of public institutions for the presentation of the arts lies in providing the space and time for experiments of liberation.

## I. THE PARADOX OF LIBERATION<sup>1</sup>

(i) *Liberation is Self-liberation.* – What does it mean to be free? What kind of being is freedom? How is it to be free? The answer is that one never *is* free: freedom does not exist. Not because freedom is an illusion and because in “reality” – the reality which the sciences describe and explain – there are only mechanisms which determine us. Rather freedom does not exist because freedom is not a property or a quality. The being of freedom is (in) its becoming: to be free means to *become* free. Freedom is not a condition but a process; freedom is the process of the becoming of freedom.

But how does one, or how *can* one, become free? One traditional answer is to think of freedom as something given to us: freedom then is (or would be) a gift. The paradigm case is the liberation of the slave by the master. The slave becomes free by being set free by its master. The master gives the slave freedom or the master gives freedom to the slave. In this model, the becoming free of the oppressed depends on the oppressor’s decision to grant it. The becoming of freedom is hence dependent on someone else’s will and decision. The slave which has been liberated by the decision of the master remains unfree. Freedom can thus not be given by another, it can only be brought about by oneself. If freedom is the process of its becoming, then its becoming must already itself be an act of freedom. Freedom consists in the act of making itself. We only *are* free by *making* us free. Freedom consists in the act of self-liberation.

Another way of putting this is by saying that freedom is not positive – not a positively existing condition, something which is given. Freedom rather is negative, the endless repetition of the negation of unfreedom. That freedom is liberation defines its negativity: freedom is essentially a negative power, the power of being able to negate conditions of depen-

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<sup>1</sup> I will not give references to Hegel’s works in this section; for a more detailed account see “Hegel’s Theory of Liberation: Law, Freedom, History, Society”, in: *Symposium*, Vol. 17 [2013], No. 1, pp. 10-30.

dence, domination, repression. Freedom only exists in the permanent revolt against unfreedom.

(ii) *The Circle of Liberation*. – The radical definition of freedom as self-liberation poses a problem which seems impossible to solve and thus threatens the whole approach with absurdity. This is the problem of circularity. The problem is the following: Liberation, in order to bring about one's freedom, has to have been one's own deed; liberation means *self*-liberation. Any deed or act however *presupposes* freedom; freedom must already exist at the beginning. The thinking of liberation seems to be entangled in a paradox right from the start. If freedom means self-liberation – who then is the self, the 'subject,' capable of performing this act? The subject that is able to actually liberate itself does not need to do so (because it is already free), while the subject that is actually in need of liberating itself will be never able to do so (because it is not yet free).

(iii) *Social Identity*. – The way out of this circle leads through a better understanding of the condition of unfreedom, of bondage or domination (from which we want to break free). At first sight, domination seems to come from outside: the one (person, group, class) rules over the other. But as Michael Walzer has said, "No ancient regime is merely oppressive; it is also seductive." It is seductive because it defines who we are: what we desire, will, know, and think. Domination is not only external but internal, the habit of servitude. The basis for the reproduction of orders of domination is thus the habits that form us: our identity as social members. The socially defined identity of the subject is the basis of its domination. Or the basis for its domination lies in the dominated subject itself: its having—being defined by—an identity that is produced by mechanisms of habituation.

This allows, first of all, for a better understanding of the process of self-liberation. It has to be a break with habit: with what (or who) we habitually are, with our identities. Self-liberation hence is self-transformation: to become free means to become free from the self which one always already is. Self-liberation has to be conceived of as the liberation by the self of its own identity. Secondly and furthermore, this

clarification of the condition of unfreedom (as social identity or habit) at the same time leads the way out of the circle of self-liberation.

(iv) “*Bildung*.” – The key to this solution is the analysis of the processes in which habits or identities are formed. I take this to be the crucial insight of Hegel’s conception of *Bildung*. *Bildung* is the formation of the subject. Subject-formation is the acquisition of capacities in becoming a social member, a competent participant of social practices. These capacities define our identity to which we are bound and from which we thus need (and want) to liberate us. But the formation of the subject, the bringing about of its social identity, was itself already a process of liberation. With this insight, the circle of liberation thus takes on an entirely new (and less vicious or self-contradictory) form which promises a way out. The insight of the concept of *Bildung* is: The social identity *from* which the subject needs to liberate itself, is itself the result of a prior liberation. There is already (or has always already been) a (pre-)history of liberation before the present act of liberation. The insight of the concept of *Bildung* consists in a radical historicization of liberation. The future of liberation (the possibility of self-liberation) depends on its prehistory.

(v) *Negativity and Discipline*. – *Bildung* as subject-formation is the process that leads from the state of nature to the state of culture or society; from human beings as natural beings to social participants. This is a double process. On the one hand, it means to break free from natural necessity, from being determined by one’s natural condition (instincts, needs, etc.). It means to acquire the power of negativity. As Hegel puts it: “spirit *can* abstract from everything external including its own externality, its very own existence.” This is the “polemical” sense of freedom, of the subject being able to distinguish itself from “external” determinations, that is, determinations that are naturally pre-given– the power to break with the power of nature. On the other hand, the power of negativity over or against nature only comes with the acquisition of social capacities through the *training* of one’s own body and spirit. This is the “*hard work* of opposing [...] the immediacy of desire” (Hegel) that can only be performed by actually working, through labor. Labor means social discipline. *Bildung*, the formation of

the subject, consists thus in the subjection *to* the determining powers of social forms and norms.

*Bildung* thus has two sides: (a) the bringing forth of the power of negativity (*vis a vis* nature); freedom from determination; (b) the bringing forth of a new form of nature: second nature; a new social form of necessity. *Bildung* is thus negativity against necessity *and* the doubling, or reduplication, of necessity. *Bildung* is the way from one necessity to the other. This way leads through negativity: *Bildung* is the way from natural necessity through negativity to social necessity. It is discipline *and* liberation at the same time.

(vi) “*Higher Liberation.*” – Hegel’s claim is that this paradox of *Bildung* is at the same time the solution of the problem of self-liberation. He describes this as the dialectic of *Bildung* and calls it the “*work* of a higher liberation.”

The problem of self-liberation is: how can the subject break free from its socially defined identity if all that the subject *can* do is defined by the capacities that it has acquired in its social formation? The answer of the concept of *Bildung* is that we can only break free from our social identities by once again going back from our socially defined form to the moment and power of breaking with nature that underlies that social form. This does obviously not mean to go back to nature; the higher liberation from social domination cannot be found in nature (for nature is an order of necessity). But it can’t be found in society either. The higher liberation can only be found *in between* nature and society. *Bildung* does not only lead from one order of necessity to another. By doubling the order of necessity, *Bildung* also splits necessity into two. *Bildung* opens a gap between the one order of necessity and the other order of necessity. This is the potential of radical freedom that we gain by *Bildung* and that we can use for the “*work* of a higher liberation” from social discipline. It is the freedom of the in-between of nature and society.

(vii) *Higher Liberation is Second Liberation, or Liberation is the Repetition of Liberation.* – The work of higher liberation consists in going

on negating; in not limiting the power of negativity to the necessities of nature; in not stopping at the production of social forms and identities; in just not stopping – in *continuing* liberation. *Bildung* as higher liberation is endless liberation or liberation that has become *permanent*. Or higher liberation is liberation that turns against itself. The higher work of liberation consists in working through the first act of liberation that led from natural to social necessity. “Working through” means to repeat. The higher liberation is a repetition of social formation, as discipline. The disciplinary replacement of natural necessity with social necessity could never have been carried out in freedom. For such a replacement leads to freedom in the first place. In order to be able to lead to freedom, however, the formation of social discipline must be retrospectively re-appropriated by those who were subjected to it. They thereby retrospectively make the process of their formation into their own act; they re-perform their formation as (if it were) an act of freedom (while in fact freedom only results from this process). In this liberating re-performance of its own social formation, liberation returns to the origin of the social in the moment of breaking with natural necessity. The re-performance of social formation is liberating because (or whence) it regains and re-enacts the originary power of negativity. Liberation means to dissolve social forms and norms into the indeterminacy of formlessness and to generate them anew out of this abyss. The work of higher liberation is the experiment of freedom: the experimental re-enactment of the social formation of the subject as an act of freedom.

## II. AESTHETIC EXPERIMENTATION

I have followed Hegel’s radical program of unfolding the dialectic of *Bildung*, of the formation of the subject, till the point where it became necessary to introduce an idea which leads beyond the scope of dialectical thinking and hence of Hegel’s philosophy as such. This is the idea of experimentation: the “higher liberation” of which Hegel speaks can only be conceived of as an experimental repetition of the formation of the subject. The repetition of its social formation is an act of liberation

if it is the return of the subject to its point of origin: to the gap between nature and society or culture. Lying between two different orders, between two different forms of determination the gap between nature and society or culture is a moment of radical indeterminacy or negativity: the time and place of the absence, of the negation of any determination. The “higher liberation”, which is the true idea of *Bildung*, consists thus in the re-enactment of the gap, which is the origin of the subject, by the subject. This is the radical experiment without which no liberation is possible: the subject has to perform the dangerous, risky operation of going back behind itself, its social form, in order to go beyond itself. – How is such an experimental act even conceivable?

We find an answer to this question in aesthetics, in the specifically modern form of thinking about the arts: the idea of radical experimentation, and hence of liberation, is an aesthetic idea. My claim thus is the following: the “work of the higher liberation” can neither be understood nor can it be practiced and realized without the aesthetic practice of the experience of art; without the experience of art, no self-liberation. For the experience of art, adequately understood and practiced, is a radical experiment; aesthetic experience is radical experimentation. – This holds in a twofold sense:

It holds first of all, because every work of art is an experiment: it is an experiment in art, an attempt to see whether one can *create* art in such a way; indeed if one can create art at all. Every artwork is an experiment because every artwork starts from nothing—an artwork that does not start from nothing, but rather takes art to be assured and a given, is no artwork at all. Every artwork is an experiment because it tests the very possibility of art. It tests the possibility of creating something, a work, *out of* the state of nothing, of radical indeterminacy. Because this possibility is in equal measure an impossibility—for this is a state of formlessness and therefore of worklessness, of “*désœuvrement*” or “un-working” (Foucault)—the existence, i.e., the bringing-into-being of the artwork is fundamentally uncertain. The artwork is in its essence an experiment because nothing can have guaranteed its having become real.



But aesthetic experience is not only the experience of the experiment which the artwork performs (or rather which the artwork *is*). Aesthetic experience is also an experiment in life. Those who make works of art and those who experience them, those who begin composing, playing, singing, writing poetry or painting and those who listen to them, watch them and follow them, are thus aesthetically active—but they put this aesthetic activity into practice in their lives. Those who create and those who experience artworks are faced with the question of how to live with and according to these works. They are faced with the question of what place in life they want to or can give to aesthetic activity—and of whether this activity can be confined to that place. They are faced, that is, with the question of what the aesthetic activity they do does to them.

Every artwork is an experiment because it interrogates the possibility of art, and every artwork is an experiment because, as an object of aesthetic activities carried out in someone's life, it interrogates the possibility of living with or according to art. Aesthetic experience is the experience *of* an experiment, and it turns the life of the experiencing self *into* an experiment.

*(i) The Experiment in Art*

The concept of experiment comes from the empirical, natural sciences. Here it means the technique of gaining knowledge: one conducts an experiment in order to find out what a thing is like and how it behaves. In order to find this out one has to do something: to experiment is to create constellations, situations, arrangements in which something then takes place and reveals itself. The experimenter actively creates something and exposes herself – passively, receptively – to an event. The experiment connects receptivity with activity.

In the scientific experiment, this connection takes on a hierarchical form: the experiment *binds* receptivity *to* activity. The scientific experiment organizes the experience in such a way that its receptivity takes on the form of a subjectively controlled process. It turns receptivity itself into an activity whose form is determined by the experimenting subject. As Kant puts it: the experimenter wants to be “taught by nature”, but

he is not “to be instructed by nature [...] like a pupil, who has recited to him whatever the teacher wants to say, but like an appointed judge who compels witnesses to answer the questions he puts to them.”<sup>2</sup> In the scientific experiment, the subject stays in control even of its own receptivity: like a judge, law in hand, a scientific experimenter registers reproduced events in a prescribed form. This is what it is, according to Kant, to *make* an experiment: to take the testimony of witnesses and put it into a form in which it can be subsumed under the law. The receptivity of experience thus either takes place under the conditions of the law—or it leads to no experience at all, but rather produces something merely arbitrary, without meaning: mere noise. According to Kant, the scientific experiment is thus the act of exposing oneself receptively to an event in such a way as can establish the guiding role of subjective laws; receptivity is here a stage in the legislative activity of the subject—or better, a means of consummating this activity. In the experiment “reason has insight only into what it itself produces according to its own design” (Ibid., B XIII).

In the aesthetic experiment this relation is reversed: the aesthetic experiment is the experiment of a reversal of the practice of knowledge and its mode of subjectivity.<sup>3</sup> For in aesthetic experience, the receptivity of the senses and the legislative activity of the subject stand in an entirely different, even opposite, relation to each other than that which Kant finds in scientific experience. This is why (and how) Kant understands the aesthetic state as a state of freedom: in aesthetic experience, the hierarchical, subsumptive relationship between the lawful activity of the subject and its receptivity or sensitivity is suspended. In the aesthetic state, receptivity—and more specifically, the imagination—is

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<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, ed./trans. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 108–109 (B XIII–XIV).

<sup>3</sup> I leave aside here the question of whether the Kantian conception is adequate for actual scientific *practice*. On the counter-claim that the real function of the scientific experiment is the “production of differences” see Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *Toward a History of Epistemic Things: Synthesizing Proteins in the Test Tube* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 224.

free, because it is not led from without by the laws or the concepts of the understanding: “the [aesthetic] freedom of the imagination consists precisely in the fact that it schematizes without a concept.”<sup>4</sup> Aesthetic freedom is the freedom of the imagination from the law-giving power of the rational subject.

In the following, I will interpret this Kantian definition of aesthetic freedom in a Nietzschean sense (and hence in a sense that goes beyond Kant). Nietzsche’s radicalization of the Kantian idea of aesthetic freedom defines the aesthetic state as that in which our receptivity or imagination is no longer led by the law (as Kant’s metaphor of the judge claimed it to be the case in the scientific experiment) and can thus also no longer be understood as the subject’s self-determined activity, as a bringing-forth “according to its own design.” According to Nietzsche, the aesthetic free play of imagination is not the self-conscious and self-determined act of a subject anymore. The aesthetic freedom of the imagination is rather precisely the state which Plato described as enthusiasm and Nietzsche, following Plato, as “intoxication” (or “frenzy”: *Rausch*). The free play of the imagination takes place in the subject, however it is not guided by the subject, by the law the subject gives itself and follows; it is (as I suggest to say) not the realization of a capacity, but the unfolding of a “force.”<sup>5</sup>

This explains why art is an experiment. Of course, also art is a self-conscious, planned activity, pursued upon the basis of knowledge. The aim of art as such an activity is to bring forth forms, forms of representation (as representations of forms: the forms of life). But in art, the self-conscious activity of the production of forms passes all the way through the freedom of the imagination: it is a bringing-forth of forms *from* and *through* the freedom of the imagination. This freedom is without form. The freedom of the imagination is the play—infinite within itself—of

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<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 167.

<sup>5</sup> Christoph Menke, *Force. A Fundamental Concept of Aesthetic Anthropology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

creating forms, dissolving forms, transforming forms and re-creating forms. This aesthetic play brings forth no works (of art), because it brings forth nothing that is not dissolved and transformed in the same very moment of its appearance. The activity of art thus consists in bringing forth forms from formlessness. This is the experiment which the activity of art, if it wants to succeed, must constantly conduct anew: in the process of formation, it must expose itself to that which questions its aim, the bringing forth of forms. The artistic experiment is always an experiment in the breaking of form—but not by another, new form, but rather by no form at all, by formlessness or non-form as the grounding of form.

According to Kant, the scientific experiment should ensure that the subject in empirical experience is and remains productive according to its own laws. Art, by contrast, reveals itself as an experiment in the collapse of precisely this certainty, which the scientific experiment is supposed to supply. Art is at every moment, again and again, an experiment, for no other reason than because it never attains this certainty, even—or especially—not when it succeeds. This is the radical new meaning which aesthetics lends to the concept of the experiment. The experiment is an act of bringing forth that which is subject to the loss of itself in the aesthetic freedom of the imagination: the experiment of form-giving out of the freedom of formlessness, the experiment of an act out of the loss of the ability to act.

### *(ii) Play-Acting, for Example*

As art, in each of its works, is an experiment in freedom, so are the activities in which the work realizes itself. It is thus that Nietzsche described the “process” (*Prozeß*) of the theatrical actor.<sup>6</sup> It is a two-step, Dionysian-Apollonian double process. The first step in acting consists in a “transformation” or “enchantment,” in which those transformed com-

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<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speiers, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speiers (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 42.

pletely forget “their civic past, their social position.” This distinguishes the actor from the epic rhapsodist:

This dynamic [...] is the original *dramatic* phenomenon: to see oneself transformed before one’s eyes and now to act as if one really had entered another body, another character. This process stands at the beginning of the development of drama. Here is something different from the rhapsodist, who does not fuse with his images, but, like the painter, sees them with an observing eye outside himself; in the dramatic process there is already a surrender of individuality by the entry into a strange nature. (Ibid., 43)

The “surrender of individuality by the entry into a strange nature [*fremde Natur*]” does *not* mean entering, by way of empathy, into the dramatic character. The “strange nature” into which the actor enters is rather his or her own. Play acting begins with a return to the pre-subjective aesthetic nature, an act of self-forgetting, a “surrender of individuality.” Nietzsche describes this as a radical self-transformation. The actors become part of the choir of satyrs: “their god’s timeless servants, living beyond all regions of society” (Ibid., 43-4). The first and fundamental step in the “process of the actor,” as in any truly artistic process, is “self-renunciation.” (Ibid., 30; translation modified)

But in order that the result be art, in other words a form, a representation (of something), this *must* be followed by a second step. “Enchantment,” or intoxication, is only “the *precondition* of all dramatic art.” (Ibid., 44; my emphasis) For there to be art, it needs the “redemption” from this state—the isolation, fixation and preservation of a single element *out* of the intoxicated “total unleashing of all symbolic powers.” In the second step, the actor, in her “enchantment,” has a “vision” (ibid.); she brings forth an image—something that can be viewed because it exists outside and independently of her intoxicated enchantment. If the intoxicated “total unleashing of all symbolic powers” which the actor experiences in the first step can be understood as a free play of the imagination in which an image, in the moment of its creation, is already transforming and developing further into another new image, in which therefore becoming and decaying merge into one—

then it is part of the *art* of the actor to distill an image from this state of intoxication and preserve it as such: to fashion *herself* into an image that stands before others and is visible to them.

It is precisely in this that the experiment of the actor consists, or in this regard that the actor's art is an experiment: the actor makes herself, her body, her speech, her movements into an image—of something, for others. But the actor can do so only on the basis of self-renunciation, of her self-surrender to an interplay of forces of which she is not conscious and over which she has no control. The image derives from the play of the imagination. The actor's art is therefore double, even contradictory in nature: surrendering the self to the interplay of forces *as well as* extricating the self from the interplay of forces. The actor's art is an experiment because it consists in enduring this contradiction. Art does not produce—as Kant says of scientific knowledge production—“according to its own design.” Art must be an experiment because its bringing-forth of form originates in the exposure to the formless.

### *(iii) The Experiment in Life*

One can relate in two different ways to the aesthetic experiment of art: one can either try to confine its power and working to the realm of the arts. The aesthetic experiment of bringing forth a form from the free play of imagination, from the abyss of the formless, would then be the privilege, or the peculiarity, of the separate cultural sphere which we, in Western modernity, call the arts. It would not have any further consequences. The opposite view is expressed by programmatic formula which Nietzsche has coined at the beginning of his philosophical thinking. This formula claims that the most urgent “problem” lies in “*finding the culture for our music*”<sup>7</sup>; the problem lies in finding, or rather inventing, a culture, a form of life which does justice to the fact, gleaned from the experience of art, that form proceeds from the surren-

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<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente, Sommer 1872 – Anfang 1873*, in: *Kritische Studienausgabe [KSA]*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich, Berlin, New York: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, de Gruyter, 1988), vol. 7, p. 426.

der of one's self to the aesthetic freedom of formlessness. According to Nietzsche, we need to think about how to change our life, our culture, in order to be true to what we experience in artistic experiments. This raises the question for how an aesthetic experimentation in, and hence with, life looks like. What, or how, is life in aesthetic experiments? Or what, or how, are we in aesthetic experiments? What is the shape of an (aesthetically) experimental form of subjectivity?

The aesthetic experiments in life transform how we act: to make aesthetic experiments in life means to act in an experimental way, to turn one's action into experiments. There are two meanings one can give to this program. The first is superficial. In this superficial reading, the experiments in action refer to the most efficient means and ways of reaching a goal; they are experiments in efficiency. Capitalism of course is an experimental form of economy in this sense. Its fundamental imperative is: you must experiment; you must try out new, more efficient ways of behavior, of thinking, of desiring, of living.<sup>8</sup> In the second reading, which is indeed opposite to the first, the experiment does not refer to means of acting, but to the very *form* of action. Read in the second way, the experiment is not instrumental, but ontological (or it is not economic but aesthetic). It is a way of acting that, while acting, puts the very possibility of acting into question.

To perform an action experimentally thus means to perform it in such a way that its success is an open question. In ordinary acting, this usually is not and cannot be the case. We speak of an action only in cases where there is a subject who possesses the capacity to perform the action. These are the capacities which form our socially defined identities, as social participants (as described in part I above). For such a capable subject, success is not an open question but rather in principle guaranteed (so long as nothing interferes). *During* the performance of an action and *for* the subject performing it, success is the normal outcome. For this is precisely what it means to be able to act, i.e. to be a sub-

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Christoph Menke, "One Must Experiment. Art in Contemporary Capitalism," in: Stefanie Heraeus (Hg.), *Hélio Oiticica. Curating the Penetráveis* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016), pp. 78-94.

ject: to be able to perform an action successfully. So acting can only become an experiment for the agent when the normalcy of success is shattered. But because the normalcy of success defines action, experimental action puts at stake not just this or that means or way of acting (as is the case in the superficial, instrumental or economic understanding of experimental acting); rather it puts into question the fact, and hence the form, of acting itself. The question which someone who performs an act experimentally asks herself, which she must be willing to ask herself, is not just: can I act successfully in this manner? Will these steps lead me to my aim? But rather: can I act at all? Am I—still—the performer of an act and hence a subject? To act experimentally means to turn the possibility of action and thus the existence of subjectivity as such into an open question.

To act experimentally, to conduct an experiment on oneself, is to act without knowing whether one can act—to act in the obscurity of not-knowing. But this not-knowing about one's own ability to act, and therefore about the act's success, is at the same time a knowledge of knowledge, a higher knowledge: the knowledge, or more precisely the experience, that the action which thereby becomes an experiment is subject to an opposing force which undermines it and calls it into question. The experiment, the radical experiment with oneself, is likewise only possible and necessary—the experiment can only exist and is only then *needed*—where the capacity to act is faced with an opposing force that works against it and puts into question its exercise, and thus the success of the act—making it an open unanswerable question. To act experimentally thus means to act in life like the actor does on stage.

If the aesthetic experiment in life is thus an experiment with capacity to act, it is thereby an experiment with the form of subjectivity. For a subject is nothing but someone who can act; subjectivity means agency, agency means capacity. Ordinarily, the subject enacts the capacities which it has acquired, or which have been inscribed in it, by way of its disciplinary formation. In its ordinary way of acting, desiring, thinking and living, the subject endlessly repeats, and thereby uncritically affirms, its socially defined capacities, its *being* a subject with certain



socially defined capacities. Only in aesthetic experiments can the subject put its own social form into question. For to act experimentally means to act in acknowledgment of the pre-subjective counter-force, the force of formlessness or the formless force, which is always effective in the subject against its own form.

Nietzsche has described this experimental act in which the subject acknowledges its non-subjective counterforce as showing a very special kind of virtue. This is a virtue he ascribes to Richard Wagner. He calls this virtue Wagner's "loyalty" to himself: "the two sides of his nature [Nietzsche writes about Wagner] remained faithful to each other, [...] out of free and unselfish love, the creative, ingenuous, and brilliant side kept loyally [faithfully: *treu*] abreast of the dark, the intractable, and the tyrannical side."<sup>9</sup> This loyalty or fidelity does not refer to what one is, to one's own identity; it hence is not a confirmation of one's own way of being, one's own nature or destiny. Rather it is loyalty to "the dark, the intractable, and the tyrannical side" – to the opposing force the subject bears within. The aesthetic experiments *in life*, as experiments with the very form of subjectivity, are practices of this virtue of loyalty. To experiment with oneself means to be loyal to the force which works in oneself against oneself as a socially defined subject.

### III. EXPERIMENT AND INSTITUTION

Nietzsche's early fascination with Wagner and his risky loyalty to his aesthetic other side was by no means limited to the inner structure of the artistically creative subject. Rather, it is about remaining true to the aesthetic play, its power and freedom in life. Therein lies Wagner's politics of cultural transformation, even cultural revolution. It is about changing culture through staying true to the aesthetic process of producing form from formlessness not only in the act of artistic creation, the creation of the artwork, but through art beyond art, i.e. in life. For

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<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 203.

this it is necessary, as Nietzsche says about Wagner's preoccupation, "to provide his art with a place in this world."<sup>10</sup> In order to change culture, art first of all has to be present and effective in the world. It has to claim and be granted and build its place in the world.

This program—of providing art with a place in the world—is different from the avant-garde idea of realizing art in life, of art *becoming* life. For in its common understanding this transfer from art to life remains subjectivistic and individualistic. It means that I may turn *my* life into a permanent aesthetic experiment—an experiment with the forms of subjectivity, of agency, of identity, love, friendship etc. Wagner's way that Nietzsche's formula tries to grasp was quite different: he attempted to reach the goal of inserting art into life by founding an *institution*: for Wagner, to provide art with a place in this world means to institutionalize it, to set up a stable framework with no other purpose than to present art in public and to establish a locale reserved for the aesthetic, playful, free engagement with art. The place of art in the world, in Wagner's conviction, must be an institutional apparatus whose long-term function is defined as maintaining the continuity of a space of presentation, of its structure and personnel. Bayreuth is the name of the institution that Wagner created to perform this task of providing the place for his art in the world. Its model, then as now, are the institutions of visual art, the museums and academies.

We can describe the art institution—the museum, academy, the *Festspielhaus*, etc.—and the individually performed aesthetic experiment as two ways of providing art with a place in the world that are fundamentally different: as two paradigms of making art effective in our lives and culture. What is the relationship between these two modes? In what relation do the art institution and the individually performed aesthetic experiment stand to each other?

It is a complex, even contradictory relation. Only at an initial, far too quick glance does their relation seem to be a simple opposition. Under-

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<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, Anfang 1874 – Frühjahr 1874, in KSA, vol. 7, p. 767.

stood in this – all too – simple way, the institution is determined by a functionally defined structure in which art likewise takes on a determined quality. The institution determines and defines art; it assigns to the artwork a specific, determinate place in culture and history; it attributes a higher or lower value to each artwork; it defines its relations to other artworks and gives each of them a specific interpretation and meaning. In short, the art institution, simply by the way of its structure and functioning, de-aestheticizes art; it robs it of its aesthetic freedom. And this has the counter-effect that aesthetic freedom, on the other side, seems to become extra-, even counterinstitutional: if aesthetic freedom cannot realize itself in the institutional setting of art, it only, or so it seems, can be realized in the inner, private experience of the individual. Aesthetic freedom becomes the merely inward state of those who experience art within the institution. The simple view is that the art institution and the aesthetic experience are opposed: The institution of art always *intends* something by the artworks which it presents; the institution turns art into an instrument of a cultural-political strategy. The freedom of the aesthetic state can thus only be preserved on the other side of the institution, in the withdrawn inner private realm of the observer. The institution privatizes aesthetic experience and robs it of its force. To reclaim its aesthetic forces, to revitalize aesthetic freedom in experiments that transform our lives—as the avantgardes do—thus can only mean to destroy the institution and its power of definition and determination.

But as it turns out, the institution that stands opposed to the experiment is at the same time *presupposed* in and by the experiment. The experiment undermines the institution and the determined structure it lends to art; and the experiment also needs the institution. For the experiment *is* not the aesthetic state, but rather the attempt to remain true *to* the *aesthetic* state of freedom. The experiment's loyalty to the aesthetic state thus presupposes a difference between the two. Only in differing from the aesthetic state can one remain true to its freedom (and only in this way, as a different state, is this an aesthetic state or a state of freedom). The total experiment would not be an experiment anymore, but rather regression or barbarism. Therefore, the experi-

ment of a life with art requires the institution of art: the experiment requires the institutions of presentation and education, of “formation” (*Bildung*), through which art takes on that determined quality which allows one to differ from the aesthetic state in the first place. The institutional interruption of the aesthetic state is the precondition for one’s loyalty to it. The will to experiment with an artistic life paradoxically entails the will to preserve the institutions of art.

This also holds vice versa for the institutions of art. Just as on the one side the experiment of a life with art can only be performed under the presupposition of institutions that assign to art a determinacy and a “place in the world,” the art institution on the other side presupposes the aesthetic freedom of experimentation (that disrupts it). This is the case for the simple reason that it is an institution that attempts at providing *art* with a place in the world. However, as we have seen there is no art that is not experimental in itself. In order to be an art institution, it therefore has to perform a paradoxical task: it has to provide the freedom of aesthetic experimentation with a place in the world, while such freedom, by its very nature cannot be put at, and hence limited to, a specific, determinate place in the world. The paradoxical task of the institution of art consists in institutionalizing experiments of freedom, of liberation, which undermine the very logic and power of any institutionalization.

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The idea of liberation is antagonist: it is torn by an inner conflict. Indeed, liberation or emancipation itself is a site of conflict. This is the conflict between the first and the second liberation, the liberation through labor and the “work of higher liberation” (Hegel). Liberation at first is the formation of the subject as a capable, valuable social participant. However, liberation cannot stop at this point. It needs the liberation from (such) liberation. This second, higher liberation is a return to the origin, a repetition of the very act in which the first liberation broke free from the natural forms of necessity. The higher liberation revives, or rejuvenates, the force of negativity which lies at the ground

of all social forms; it turns the ground – the force of negativity – against its results – the social form of the subject, its identity, its capacities.

I have claimed that the arts can provide a model for this liberating re-enactment of the gap of negativity between nature and culture or society. The experience of art then becomes the scene of a radical experiment. These are experiments of form, of the bringing forth of form from the formless play of imagination. There are however two very different, even opposite, ways of understanding and performing the experiments of art. In the first one, the experiments of art are performed in a restrictive way: they are restricted to the limits of the sphere of art. In the second way, the experiments of form, which the arts perform are used for experiments of liberation in life. What are the conditions of such a liberating, emancipatory usage of the arts? These conditions cannot just be individual dispositions; whether to use the experiments of art in an emancipatory or a conservative way does not just depend on individual choice. At least the emancipatory use of the arts is a collective endeavor in which the institutions of art, the institutions of artistic educations, like the art academy, and the institutions of the public presentation of art, like the museum, play a decisive role. Their task is to present the experiments of art as a model and medium for the emancipatory self-transformation of the subject (which is always a transformation of society at the same time; for the subject is, or has, a social form). As I have indicated, this is a difficult, even paradoxical task. For it demands of the art institutions no less than to work against themselves.

*Sundar Sarukkai*

## Object | Space | Publics

### OBJECT

Is a museum only a display of objects? It also has to curate the objects and unless the narrative of the curation is present, the objects, as a collection by themselves, do not make much sense. So there are two basic questions about objects that we need to begin with: should the focus of the museum be objects as unified entities? Or should it be processes in which these objects participate, belong to or arose from?

Objects do not become objects by themselves. Every object is prepared in various ways to appear as objects. This could be by being named, for example. When an object is prepared or created, and is shown as such, then we can see the reasons why the object came into being. Objects, particularly museum objects, don't fall off trees. They are cultivated and prepared, are historical and have a biography.

Thus, a museum of the future cannot be restricted to showing just the object without exhibiting its *biography*. How is this biography of an object to be recorded and exhibited? That is the creative challenge and there are many ways to do it, including using the digital technology that is available now.

So when a person encounters an object, she will not do it as if that object is a clearly defined, unambiguous entity but will only see it as an object-in-information, an object that can be seen to be different. Museums tend to present objects as if there was something necessary about their value and status. Exhibiting the biography of these objects will remind the viewer that these objects and values are contingent and sometimes also merely an accident.

Two simple ways of exhibiting these biographies can be as follows: one is purely visual and the object is placed within other objects which go to create the museum object. This exhibits the network through which

objects of museum value are created. Once it is set up like this, very soon the other objects (which would not find their way to a museum on their own) will begin to get value. Thus, every object is presented as a *network of objects*.

Another way to exhibit the biography of objects is textual and in a museum there should be digital texts which can be read in conjunction with seeing the object.

Another way to exhibit the museum object is through the idea of *dissection*. In biology classes, dissection of creatures like frogs exhibited the insides of the creature. Although seen as an educational tool, dissection has various other implications and assumptions behind it. I want to use this idea of dissection to suggest that another way to engage with objects in a museum is always as dissected bodies. Dissection makes visible the insides of an object; museums very often only present the outside of the objects. How to make the inner world of objects visible in museums? Dissection is a powerful way to do this. Through this act two important things can be achieved: one to show the object not only in its external manifestation (external form, for example) but also to exhibit the insides which give any notion of solidity and function to the object. Secondly, through this act, we highlight the importance of *process*.

The distinction between process and object has had a major influence on the way we perceive the world. An object can be seen as the final product, the presentation of the end. But this end had not only a beginning but also a temporal journey before it became an end product/object. How does one exhibit process? I want to invoke dissection as a metaphoric term to also show processes and not just stable, unified objects.

Thus, *biography* and *dissection* should be the modes of presentation of any object in the museum of the future. There are different ways of realizing these modes and that will depend on the imagination of the curator and others involved in the museum.

## DISPLAY/VIEWERSHIP

Museums create value by exhibiting an object. The object may have had some value that makes the museum acquire it but by placing it in the museum, this value either gets reinforced or even magnified. So one of the central roles of a museum is this capacity to give value to something through its presentation in the museum. But this value and the process of the creation of the value is always hidden. This is part of the politics of focussing on objects. The museum of the future should expose *its own insides* – the insides that create value for objects – as much as it displays the valued objects.

This calls for a rethink on the idea of the nature of viewing a museum. There are two parts to this rethink: one is the exhibition of the process of value creation of the object which finally makes it to the museum to be exhibited. The other is to remove the focus from the objects in a museum and instead relook at the viewer and her *forms of viewing*.

The exhibition of the process of creating value can be done in different ways, including through the use of digital archives and so on. The main aim in doing this is for the viewer to realize why that particular object is an object in the museum.

Consider a person shopping for a thing on the streets of Delhi. This person might have some idea of the value of the thing she wants to buy and through it has the capacity to bargain or discuss the value of the object with the seller. In museums, we realize that there is some great value attached to the objects there but do not know how to engage with that, do not know how to strike a conversation about it. We look at the object's value largely in ignorance. It doesn't make much sense to hear that a painting costs a million without knowing how to evaluate that value in our terms. So the museum of the future must find ways to exhibit the insides of the process of valuation (in a larger sense to do this is to explain why this object is valued enough to be placed in the museum) so that a viewer really understands the meaning of the objects that she encounters in a museum.



The second point is about changing the way the viewer views the museum. Most often, displays are about displays of objects – how to light them, present them and so on. The museum of the future which I envision will have the spotlight on the viewer and her perceptual capabilities. This museum for me will do one primary task: focus on *how* we see things and not *what* we see. Museums have become about the what-of-seeing. We are so busy running from seeing one object to another that we don't stop and ask about the process of our seeing itself. How does the museum show me how-I-see and not what-I-see? The act of perception of the viewer is itself the *first object* in my museum of the future. How one curates and exhibits this is a matter of detail.

### PUBLIC/SPACE

Earlier museums had a very important function. They gave *access to the public* to things they wouldn't have had access to. It allowed those who could not afford to buy and see great works of art to actually see them. In science museums, it gave an opportunity to people who had no access to certain institutional spaces, including educational, to actually learn about things they could not have learnt otherwise. Enormous number of interested citizens could see and learn about the space missions, for example, although they would never have been able to enter the organizations of space missions in the country. Museums were always an important space for *learning*, especially for those who were denied access to this learning.

However, things have changed today. An individual can access material on the web quite easily and this has changed the nature of teaching/learning. This also affects this particular function of the museum. And so much of the artefacts of the museum are available on the web that physical museums are slowly becoming places of 'material nostalgia'.

But there is a way out to recapture the importance of the *egalitarian possibility* in a museum, to retain the possibility of having the museum as a place where we can access things which we cannot access other-

wise. Most importantly, to access things which are also not available on the web!

The museum of the future should show things which are hidden from the public in every form, whether as material objects or even as digital files. And there are enormous number of things that are hidden from the public. Ironically, in a growing digital age, there are more number of items that are hidden. *Inaccessibility* is the *value of the future* and is a value that is worthy of being placed in museums.

What is hidden and inaccessible? Secrets. Countless secrets of the government, defence, corporate sector and so on. Secrets that also have enormous power. I am reminded of the seminal work done by the artist, Trevor Paglen, who photographed spy satellites and found evidence of secret defence establishments. His work brings to the public gaze things which certain power groups wanted to hide. Politics has a lot to hide too and so does big business.

So, I think that a variation of the WikiLeaks model will be the model for one type of the museum of future. Such a museum will educate, will enlighten and will genuinely work towards a democratic spirit in our societies.

By doing this, the *space* of the future museum will function as a *shelter* – a shelter for the future. It will continue to remain a *protected space* for access, a space that allows the ordinary citizen to access things which she could not otherwise. Also a space for education – primarily political education because other modes of education will be subsumed by the individualized digital technologies, and through this, a space that creates shared communities.

Jan Völker

## The Museum of Change

The museum of the future, if it is still a museum, will find its material and its form not only in the present of its future, but also in the past of its future, in its future past. And a part of the past of the museum of the future is our present time. And thus, we cannot think about the museum of the future without thinking about our present. The museum of the future is not only a construction of the future; it is not a construction to come, but a construction that takes place in the middle of our present. The museum of the future then is a task with which we have to begin in our present thought of the museum.

In the following, we want to develop some points regarding a museum of the future, and we will understand it as the project of the construction of a present thought, the construction of a thought of the present. However, before we outline the specific frame for this endeavor, there is a certain implication contained in the quest for the museum of the future, which demands unfolding before we continue: It seems that the idea of a ‘museum of the future’ necessarily implies a strong distinction between the present forms of the museum and its future development. The museum of the future thus ought to be a different museum than today. However, such a clear distinction would at first yield the impossible challenge of an adequate account of the museum of our days – impossible, because many different kinds of museums exist, and perhaps such a thing as *the* museum of today cannot even be addressed. Therefore it is then also impossible to think *the* museum of the future. *The* museum of the future might not exist, as *the* museum of the present does not exist either.

We will have to gain the difference of the museum of the future from a different point. And we will propose to understand it as a challenge to thought: Can we think differently of the museum, can we think a difference within the museum, which might enable us to grasp its potential future? What we are looking for then are less different definitions of

the present and the future, but rather breaks and gaps in the existing definitions of the present. The antagonism between the future of the museum and its present is already inscribed in its present, as the museum of the future begins within the present thought of the museum. This is where we should start. Let us begin with three introductory remarks on this point.

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1) The museum, the modern museum in its western tradition has always been a battlefield, and one of the main stakes of this battle is to be found in relation to the question of change. If we go back to the early 20th century, we find a harsh criticism of the museum for example in the thought of the avant-gardes. For the avant-gardes, the museum serves the conservation of the old. The museum does not simply exhibit, it rather perseveres, conserves, it continues the past into the present, and as such, from the viewpoint of the new, it displays an unavoidable reactionary character.

The outcry of Kazimir Malevich lends a representative voice to this concern. In his text “On the Museum”, which he wrote in 1919, Malevich takes a clear stance against the museum. The message is as clear as it can be, and it illustrates very distinctly a problem the revolutionary avant-gardes had with the museum. Malevich writes:

“Our contemporary life should have as its slogan: ‘all that we have made is made for the crematorium.’

The setting up of a contemporary museum is a collection of contemporaries’ projects and nothing more; only those projects which can be adapted to the skeleton of life, or which will lead to the skeleton of new forms of it, can be preserved for a time.”<sup>1</sup>

And later he continues:

“We must not allow our backs to be platforms for the old days.

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<sup>1</sup> Kazimir Malevich, “On the Museum”, in: Arseny Zhilyaev (ed.), *Avant-Garde Museology*, e-flux classics, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2015, pp. 267-273, p. 270.

Our job is to always move toward what is new, not to live in museums.  
(...)

And if we do not have collections it will be easier to fly away with the whirlwind of life. (...) Instead of collecting all sorts of old stuff we must form laboratories of a worldwide creative building apparatus, and from its axes will come forth artists of living forms rather than dead representations of objectivity. Let the conservatives go to the provinces with their dead baggage—the depraved cupids of the former debauched houses of Rubens and the Greeks. We will bring I-beams, electricity, and the lights of colors.”<sup>2</sup>

Malevich gives a very succinct account of the radical new avant-garde, embracing technology and the speed of the new world, and seeking to interrupt all links with the past. The dead and conservative is to be done away with, only what serves the construction of life can be preserved, and even that only ‘for a time’. The new, the new life, is defined as the overcoming of the old – as the overcoming of what is, in fact, already dead. The old and dead has to be abandoned, so that the new and living can flourish. But the paradigm of the old art is the museum.

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2) We can determine a similar thought in some of Walter Benjamin’s notes in his *Arcades Project*, in which he mentions the museum from time to time, calling it a “dream house.”<sup>3</sup> Benjamin’s unfolds a very specific understanding of the dream: In the Paris of the 19th century he observed the mysterious threshold on which things of everyday life turned into objects of the market, became commodities. This ambivalent sphere of an object on the threshold to becoming a commodity is what Benjamin attempted to capture by understanding it as a dream-like reality. Thus, if the museum is called a dream house, then this is in Benjamin’s sense an indication that the museum forms a part of the dream world of the early capitalism in which the borders between the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 272-3.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA, London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1999, p. 406.

interior and the exterior are abolished, the ordinary thing is on the threshold to becoming a commodity, and therefore every thing is surrounded with a dream-like aura.

In one of the rare passages that directly refer to the question of the museum, Benjamin quotes the architectural critic Sigfried Giedion, who identifies the museum as the central architectonic problem of the early 19th century. Giedion ascribes to the early 19th century a “regressive tendency to allow itself to be saturated with the past.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, for Giedion, the museum is the architecture of this regressive tendency. Benjamin adds a very interesting comment to this: “This thirst for the past forms something like the principal object of my analysis – in light of which the inside of the museum appears as an interior magnified on a giant scale. In the years 1850-1890, exhibitions take the place of museums. Comparison between the ideological bases of the two.”<sup>5</sup>

‘Exhibitions take the place of museums’, Benjamin argues, and with ‘exhibitions’ he is referring to the world exhibitions that interested Benjamin strongly. One might even say that Benjamin was far more interested in the question of the world exhibitions than in the question of the regular museum. The large shows of the technical and industrial development, dedicated to the global development of the industrial forces and to the global circuit of commodities, one of which took place in Paris 1867, provided an antidote to the arcades and their commodification of the private. Moving beyond Giedion’s point, Benjamin emphasizes a different aspect of the museum, namely the relation between the exhibition of artistic or historical objects and the fact that capitalism strips these objects of their artistic or historic value and turns them into commodities, strange objects that become objects of a dream world. It is this relation, which is brought into a material presentation in the form of the world exhibitions. A world exhibition is what a museum has to become after the thing is turned into a commodity.

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<sup>4</sup> Sigfried Giedion, in: Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, pp. 406-7.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, *ibid.*, p. 407.

But Benjamin also compares the museum directly to the market and emphasizes a parallel between the museum and the department store:

“There are relations between department store and museum, and here the bazaar provides a link. The amassing of artworks in the museum brings them into communication with commodities, which—where they offer themselves en masse to the passerby—awake in him the notion that some part of this should fall to him as well.”<sup>6</sup>

It is not only the world exhibitions that present things as commodities, but it is already the museum that presents the world of historic and artistic things just like a department store presents its commodities. And in this wake, the desire of a visitor is being created as the desire of a consumer.

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3) For the third point, let us simply recall one central feature of the origin of the modern museum. The Louvre can serve as the central paradigm in this case, being one of the first national public museums. As such, it was founded by the revolutionary state that turned the former palace of the king into a public place of the arts. The European tradition of the huge national galleries begins at this point: National museums spread all over Europe, often put into place by the revolutionary French themselves. The national museums can be said to have played a major role in the representation of the modern state. To underline this point, let us take a short quote from Carol Duncan’s book on the history of modern museums, entitled *Civilizing Rituals. Inside Public Art Museums*:

“The Louvre was the prototypical public art museum. It first offered the civic ritual that other nations would emulate. It was also with the Louvre that public art museums became signs of politically virtuous states. By the end of the nineteenth century, every western nation would boast at least one important public art museum. In the twentieth century, their popularity would spread even to the Third World, where traditional monarchs and military despots create western-style art museums to

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, *ibid.*, p. 415.

demonstrate their respect for western values, and – consequently – their worthiness as recipients of western military and economic aid.”<sup>7</sup>

To put it in other words, we can say that the modern museum is from the beginning a proper ideological institution. With reference to Althusser, we might even call it an ‘Ideological State Apparatus’<sup>8</sup>: It is an institution that not only actively promotes an ideology of the young, civic nation state, but it is precisely in this sense a part of the state itself, it is a practical ritual in which the public subject educates itself about its own history. And this history is, not to forget, the history of the break with the ancient regime. Therefore it coincides with the beginning of our democratic tradition and the modern national museum is from the beginning on a – more or less – democratic ideological state apparatus, an ideological state apparatus that creates the public as its subject.

To summarize: We obtain three paradigmatic problems that characterize the early debates about the modern museum. First, its inherent conservatism and its antagonistic position towards political, but also towards artistic change, as Malevich points out. Second, the difficult relation of the museum to the market of commodities: Not only do exhibitions of commodities overcome the classical museum, but already the structure of the museum itself resembles, mirrors the structure of the things on the market. The museum apparently disrupts its objects from their history as the market alienates its products. And third, the modern museum stands in an ideological relation to the figure of the state. It does not only promote the state, it forms a part of the state. It is, so to speak, a state apparatus. These three paradigms can then be distinguished further as they follow three different modes in which they connect their central aspects: The first – the question of the old and the new – presents an antagonism. The second – the question of the market – presents a question of similarity and equivalence. The third

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<sup>7</sup> Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals. Inside Public Art Museums*, London and New York: Routledge 1995, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, in: *Lenin and Philosophy, and other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, New York and London: Monthly Review Press 1971, pp. 127-186.



– the question of the state – presents a question of representation and reproduction. Finally we see that the first and the second paradigm are opposed with a specific tension: The museum serves to conserve the old, but at the same time it prepares the thing for the market. In this apparent contradiction, the two aspects mirror the paradigm of the state and its aspects, history and equality of the individual. There is a dialectical truth inherent to this contradiction: Against its appearance, the commodity is not something new, but rather a conservative force, enshrouded by the aura of singularity.

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Regarding our situation today, we can note that two things have essentially changed in comparison with the situation of the early 20th century. The most evident fact is that the necessity as well as the possibility for an antagonism, as it had been presented in the 20th century, has become obscured. This antagonism was actually a doubled antagonism: The antagonism as presented by Malevich, the antagonism of the old and the new, is strictly related to art. But at the same time this antagonism cannot be understood without the political antagonism that shaped the world of the 20th century. The avant-gardes established precisely the program of the dialectical intertwining of two essential antagonisms: an antagonistic art that presented an antagonistic politics.<sup>9</sup>

In the world that followed upon the avant-gardes, in the 20th century, the conflict remained a central paradigm. Even a work considered to be neutral would present this neutrality as a claim in the direction of the political conflicts that divided the world. In our contemporary situation, this prevalence of the conflict has disappeared. At the beginning of the 21st century, we are living in a time in which the possibility of a political contradiction, of an antagonism, has become uncertain. A contradiction today is not only uncertain in politics, it is also not cer-

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<sup>9</sup> I am relying here on Alain Badiou's reconstruction of the Avant-gardes. See Alain Badiou Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (Cambridge, UK / Malden, MA, polity, 2007), pp. 131-147.

tain in the field of arts. In both fields, in politics as well as in the arts, the results therefore are similar: contemporary politics does not follow the lines of a contradiction; as well as contemporary art does not follow the lines of a contradiction. Rather the contrary is the case: the structure of our situation is not only no longer focused on the centrality of a conflict, it seems rather to result from the contrary: An opposition to such an antagonism.

Here it is important to emphasize the difference between the explicit structure of the conflict and its reality, for the remark about the absence of a central conflict is of course not to suggest that we would be living in a world without conflicts. We experience a world full of multiple and very different conflicts, but at the same time these conflicts are not explicitly connected along the lines of a central antagonism. It might be said that one 'side' or aspect of a possible general contradiction can be denominated 'capitalism', as the common threat that combines the conflicts we are living in. But on the other 'side' it is fundamentally unclear whether any possible general alternative to capitalism as such is conceivable. Instead of living in a situation in which an antagonism is the real, we are living in a situation in which the possibility of political change, the possibility of something else than capitalism is fundamentally blurred. And if it were possible to link the existing conflicts along the line of a central conflict, then this would demand at the same time to be able to declare its contradictory part, its opponent. We are living in the time of a broken conflict, and it might be the precise political question of our time to inquire whether there is any alternative to capitalism possible, thinkable, constructible. As long as this is fundamentally unclear, it is capitalism that presents the new as the overcoming of the old, although the commodity in its newness is the old.

But not only the reality of the conflict has changed, what also has changed is the role of the state – in its figure as well as in its positioning within the society. In its consequence, a contemporary museum can no longer understand itself to be a representational emblem of a nation-state. A museum of contemporary art for example, if it represents anything, then it is rather the reality of the democratic discourse that

enables the general public to participate in aesthetic experiences. The role of the state is diminishing. The museum did represent the democratic participation from the beginning on, and the state that is increasingly withdrawing its symbolic power. The museum has not lost its ideological form, but it has lost the strong symbolic state in its back. However, the withdrawal of the symbolic state – the visibility of its forces, the organization of the public, the power of its administration – does not necessarily imply the withering away of the state as such. We witness today the symbolic forms of the state being transferred onto smaller or even private structures as well as onto different ideological structures. The organization of public life becomes more and more privatized, while at the same time the imaginary illusion of a general public is upheld: Any mall can serve as an example here. The appearance of the state is thus reduced and maximized at the same time: It appears scarcely, but if it turns present, then it will be there in its full force – and here the borders might be taken as the primary example. The state appears scarcely, but intensely, at its borders, while on the inside we find a public life organized by private institutions. Private galleries and collections, to give another example, unfold an increasing influence and normalize themselves by more and more addressing the general public, as well as by taking part in exhibitions. Thus galleries and collections more and more turn into equivalents of regular museums. The museum has not lost its function, rather the function of the museum is not ideologically regulated by a strong state any longer, and in the consequence different parties can fulfill this function.

Thus two of three moments in relation to the museum at the early 20th century have fundamentally changed, and this leaves us finally with the third point we have been mentioning, namely the question of the equivalence between art works and commodities. In distinction from the first two points, this aspect can be assumed to only have intensified: The intersection between art works and commodities has only accelerated, but not changed.

So, for the museum of the future, which we have to think as a thought in our contemporary time, we will have to start by thinking a time,

which is marked by the loss of an antagonism, presents a strong equivalence between the art objects and commodities, and shows an apparent disappearance of the figure of the state. In the following we will sketch out four points, which might serve as a point of departure. The first three points are oriented by the thoughts of Alain Badiou, and the fourth point will bring us back to the museum.

### 1) ANOTHER MODERNITY

We will have to rethink our relation to modernity. If modernity, and especially the 20th century can be characterized by a certain duality – opposing the old and the new, capitalism and communism, politics and art – then this duality is spelled out in the 20th century as the duality of an antagonism: The old against the new, communism against capitalism, and art against politics or politics against art. And finally, modernity itself is conceived as an overcoming of the ancient times. Instead of continuing this actually modern scheme by inventing another time that would be directed against modernity, we might propose another way and instead redirect our interest to the center of modernity, just to find another conception of modernity right at its inner core. This different conception of modernity is what Alain Badiou has presented with the gesture of affirmationism. In his “Manifesto of Affirmationism”, in which he refers to modernists such as Malevich, Mondrian, Rothko, Pessoa, Stevens, Berg, Woolf and others, he emphasizes a very different trait of their work than the usual accounts of these artists would consider – namely their affirmationist and non-antagonist side.

“This is, then, the axiomatic of an art that is neither ethnic nor egoistic. It is the axiomatic of an art that is as delocalized, as ambitious, as impersonal, and as naked for universal thought as the trait by which, thirty thousand years ago, the non-temporal signs of bisons and tigers were etched in the shadows of caves – a trait which, in its very nakedness, forever affirms the inhumanity of the Beautiful. The affirmationist axiomatic only sets out the minimal but still entirely abstract conditions that were actively distributed in the still non-sketched constellation by the artists of the century, conditions under which art remains rebellious

to imperial power, at the same time as it overcomes the romantic duplicity of the funereal and the playful.”<sup>10</sup>

Let us emphasize the most essential points: The main idea is that the gesture of affirmationism is inherently already present in the works of the modernists, but that it needs to be revealed or even to be declared. Affirmationism then denotes an art that is universal in its very nakedness, thus it is universal, because it is precisely not linked to any ethnic or egocentric paradigm; it is ‘delocalized’ and ‘impersonal’. Affirmationism denotes an art that is ‘rebellious to imperial power’, precisely because it cannot rest upon the secured grounds of some established power or its negation. Thus, affirmationist art rests only upon its own work; it is a construction fully relying on its own grounds. In different texts Badiou has unfolded in detailed examples how this can be understood. One of the examples he gives are the poems by Mallarmé: Poems that create their own real content with the sole reference to their own structure – there is, one could say, no exteriority to a poem by Mallarmé.<sup>11</sup> Affirmationism presents a trait of modernist art in which this art proves to be completely detached from any references to its social, political, artistic outsides. It presents the art of a pure construction of a form. From this point of view, we get two different understandings of the modernism of the early 20th century. On the one hand, we see the problem of the antagonistic duality, on the other hand we find the attempt of the construction of a pure form, a form that is not defined by a relation, but that rather defines its own, inner relations as its form.

A first point of departure is then to be found in the attempt to rethink our understanding of modernity in terms of the affirmationist art, because the antagonism of the old and the new is not ours any more. One concern that might be raised is that this might imply a relativist

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<sup>10</sup> Alain Badiou, “Third Sketch of a Manifesto of Affirmationist Art”, in: *Polemics*, trans. Steven Corcoran, London / New York: Verso 2006, pp. 133-148, here p. 142-3.

<sup>11</sup> See Alain Badiou: “Mallarmé’s Method: Subtraction and Isolation”, in: *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran, New York / London: Continuum 2008, pp. 49-67.

approach to art, as we would change our understanding of the art of the 20th century as a consequence of the situation of the early 21st century. But the question might also be put in another way. The question might rather be whether the problem of the antagonism and the presupposed inherent link between the overcoming of the old and the construction of the new displays is the entire problem in the frame of the 20th century. The new does not find its novelty in the old, even in the antagonistic model the creation of a form logically precedes the antagonistic opposition to the old. What we find, along the lines of Badiou's affirmationism, is a moment of contradiction, inherent to the antagonism of the 20th century: The new is not only the opponent of the old, but also detached from the old. Something of its own contrary traverses the antagonism.

Today, in the absence of new political forms and antagonisms, we should carefully watch and understand the early modernism, as we find in it not only the capacity to overcome the old, but also the capacity to build a pure and new form. It might not be evident, though, why the answer to a certain political problem should be found in the context of art. But we are only pointing to the formal side – to the formal capacity to think, to build, to create forms. This is what we can learn from the early modernists.<sup>12</sup>

Again, and as a variant of the first concern, another objection might directly follow: Namely that this procedure reinterprets our understanding of modernity simply for political reasons. Indeed, this would be a weak instrumentalist understanding of modern art. But it is more difficult than that. As long as we subscribe to the prevalence of overcoming the old, we subscribe to the modernist paradigm, as we know it. In a paradoxical sense, establishing our own time implies changing our past: But as long as we subscribe to the modernist paradigm as we know it, we still partake in the paradigm of the early 20th century itself. And this paradigm implies a political relation, it implies not only

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<sup>12</sup> Badiou has at several occasions referred to this difficult relation. It should not be mistaken as an aesthetic aspect of politics, it is only about a formal repetition of the process of creating forms.

the complicated relation between politics and art, but it also implies a relation between the antagonism in art and the antagonism in politics. If we stick to this, we haven't moved forward, although our reality in political terms has completely changed.

To rethink our relation to modernity becomes an idea with far reaching consequences. It is not about overcoming modernity as if it were old, and not about coming up with something new against the old. It is rather to say that we need a sort of intervention into our relation to modernity, as well as a change of the form of the relation presented within it. And second, this intervention does not simply add or inscribe a different view on modernity from the exterior, but it is an intervention into modernity built on a moment that is found in modernity itself. We return to the beginning of a radical modernity, and we will have to reaffirm it. This will open a truly universalist modernity. Not the universality of the supposedly prototypical human being, but the universality of the novelty of forms. The thought of new forms will set free a modernity that fundamentally differs from the account of the so-called 'contemporary art' we are dealing with today.

Maybe we do not think modern enough, although we are living in the time of modernity. Maybe the museum in its most elementary sense has always been the museum of the prehistory of the modern. To become modern, we have to affirm, and cannot remain observing the old. We witness a break in time, we live in our own prehistory, exhibited in museums. The construction and understanding of history is a central moment of modernity itself – to walk into a museum and to observe a room full of contradictions and to feel displaced in this room is a very modern condition. But once we introduce a second cut into modernity, the cut of affirmation, we open up the multiplicity of times – we have modernity itself as a time of overcoming the old and as a time of affirmation – and thus modernity is the kernel around which either the linearity or the multiplicity of historical times is built. Once we reconstruct our understanding of modernity we might be able to perceive a multiplicity of times instead of the one general cut into modernity that has given us a glimpse back to a single history of its development.

## 2) WE NEED THE MILITANT ART OF THE INVISIBLE

Let us continue with a point that was already briefly mentioned before: Namely the question of art as being rebellious to imperial power. Once again, I would like to refer to the work of Alain Badiou, who has offered a distinction which is of a very central importance today, and that is the distinction between official and militant art.<sup>13</sup> ‘Official art’ is the art that glorifies, illustrates, or represents an existing power. ‘Official art’ glorifies, illustrates, or represents what exists, the world as it is, its facts and facticity. ‘Militant art’ on the other hand rather works on the in-existent, it works on the things, forms that are only about to become. This opposition between ‘official art’ and ‘militant art’ might then easily be misunderstood as the usual distinction between a subversive, independent art on the one side and the established, accepted and uncritical art on the other side. But the central point of this distinction lies elsewhere.

“So, in official art, ideology is realized in an objective form: the inscription of the work of art in the space of that sort of objectivity. In a militant art, ideology is a subjective determination, not of an artist, but of a process, or struggle, of resistance. Official art describes the glory of what exists. It's an art of victory. I think that is the most important point. An official art with an ideological determination is an art not of weakness but of strength. A militant art is the subjective expression, not of what exists, but of what becomes. It's an art of the choice and not an art of victory. An official art is an art of affirmative certainty. A militant art is an art of contradiction, an art of the contradiction between the affirmative nature of principles and the dubious result of struggles. The point where ideology is inscribed in the work of art is not at all the same. In official art, the place of ideology is the glory of the work of art itself. In a militant art the place of ideology is the place of the contradiction and of the dubious results of the struggle.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> This distinction is made in a talk under the title “Does the notion of activist art still have meaning?”, given in New York in 2010. See <https://www.lacan.com/thevideos/10132010.html> (last retrieved 21/04/2020).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



The important point about this distinction is the different place of ideology: Both types of art act upon an ideological determination, only that ‘official art’ is an art of the given, while ‘militant art’ is an art of becoming. ‘Militant art’ is thus by no means subversive, it is not critical, and it does not even necessarily have a political implication. Instead it is directed towards the creation of new forms of becoming. It is a very interesting question to ask what kind of forms the realm of existing forms – forms of the given – in our contemporary world really comprises. Maybe we cannot rely on the distinction between forms of nature and forms of the social any more, as contemporary capitalism has since long been working on and recreating the forms of nature. If this is the case, then we will rather have to think of the realm of existing forms as the realm of the existing *capitalist* forms, as they are the dominant determination of what is. This realm of forms is no longer limited only to the western world – we know that capitalism was from the beginning on a global project. Today its formalization, its rules of inventing and creating forms, has extended far beyond the west. The existing forms of the given might then be forms of a capitalist globalization, subsuming all the forms that directly answer to this paradigm, such as those forms that seek their inscription into this capitalist globalization.

Let us take a short look at these forms. For Badiou they present a “democratic materialism” relying on the sole instances of “*bodies and languages*”.<sup>15</sup> The direct translation of this materialism is to be found in an art that is either based on the differences of existing bodies – which is related to the body, to the exploration the body, to the praise of the body in its glory and grief – or that relates to the multiplicity of languages and stresses the necessary tolerance demanded for and by these differences. Now under the reign of this metaphysics – there are only bodies and languages – Badiou has identified two different main variants of contemporary art: Romantic Formalism, as Badiou calls it, celebrates the richness of the individual bodies, it pretends to withdraw

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<sup>15</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds, Being and Event 2*, trans. Alberto Toscano, London/New York: Continuum 2009, p. 1.

itself from the general circulation, while pseudo-classicism is a certain renewed version of the culture industry, it is an art of the empire, a festivity of the given rules and things.<sup>16</sup>

‘Militant’ in this sense is first of all an art that does not believe in bodies and languages to be the only things there are. ‘Militant’ is then further the belief that there is something else, something that cannot be accounted for in the empire. ‘Militant’ is finally rather the designation of an exceptional act, instead of the negating practice of a subversive act. Militant art is not subversive, but constructs a different universalism, different from the reigning capitalist globalized perspective.<sup>17</sup>

### 3) WE NEED A LOCALIZED UNIVERSALISM

In the same text in which Badiou proposes to distinguish between the ‘official’ and the ‘militant’ art, he also addresses the contemporary situation. The problem of the distinction between official and militant art is, according to Badiou, that it is actually only possible against the background of a strong ideology.

“When there does not exist a strong ideology, it is much more difficult to explain what is precisely, first, a militant art, because the subjective conviction is unclear, and second, to explain what is different between official art and militant art, against the same ideological background. This is the first point of difference. The second is that today, as a result of history, there is no charismatic power. And so there is no possibility for a strong official art, because there is no space of power, space of the state, where something like an official revolutionary art can be revealed. So, the two major conditions of militant and official art and the distinction between the two are not realized today.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Badiou’s “Third Sketch of a Manifesto of Affirmationist Art”, pp. 138-140.

<sup>17</sup> As Badiou puts it in the Manifesto, thesis 15: “It is better to do nothing than to work formally toward making visible what the West declares to exist.” Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>18</sup> Badiou, “Does the notion of activist art still have a meaning?.”

This analysis can be taken as an analysis of the current dominance of democracy in the western societies: As an ideology it is “weak”<sup>19</sup>, as it does not have its own proper antagonist, and it does not unfold its own clear symbolic spaces. In the sense of the symbolic structure, we are living in a different world – and the question becomes how we can proceed in times of an absence of any strong ideology. Here, Badiou proposes four points, which we might quickly summarize: The first point is an answer to the absence of strong ideological organizations – if we think of a party for example, we see that an organization is always also the creation of a space. If this space is not available, Badiou concludes, it becomes necessary that the artist works in relation to very concrete “local forms” and “experiences.”<sup>20</sup> Second, it will be necessary to organize the return of a strong ideology: A “strong intellectuality” is needed for a new art to be active in the attempt to create new forms of a strong ideology.<sup>21</sup> Third, we need to keep a distance from forms of representation, which means in the end: we need to keep distance from any form of the state. Rather, art should attempt to make something visible that is only about to become. And fourth, the artist attempts to connect all the first three points in an actual artwork: “Local transformation, which is intellectually ambitious and which is formally avant-garde in the classical sense of the substitution of presentation for an ornamental vision of representation.”<sup>22</sup>

The main point is that in the absence of any possible orientation by a strong ideology and a paradigmatic contradiction, we need to think and act on a local basis: To think and act in local contradictions that allow to construct a new universal contradiction as well as to think of a new ideology.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

#### 4) MUSEUM AS A PHILOSOPHICAL INSTITUTION

To change our relation to modernity, to observe the militant art of the invisible, and to finally strengthen the work on the localized universalism – we see that the museum can play an important role for a vivid connection of these three points. For it is the museum that helps us to restructure our understanding of modernity, for it is the museum that has the possibility to gather the weak arts of the invisible and to offer them a place of shelter, for it is the museum that can direct us to the arts of a localized universalism.

But the museum as an institution faces a set of problems in relation to these tasks. First, the museum is inherently conservative. Second, the museum places its objects in a parallel to the market. And third, the museum is established in a direct link with the state. To begin with the first: If we attempt to change our relation to modernity in the direction of the inherent affirmation, we are actually attempting to also change our understanding of the cut between the present and the past. Not only will the museum of modernity have to display two different variants of modernity, namely its antagonistic and its affirmative version, but at the same time it will have to present a different access to (the notion of) time. That is to say that with a different notion of modernity a different notion of our understanding of time is opened, modernity itself is being split into two times: The account of the past – the prehistory of modernity – and the account of the present as its own interior future.

As we are living in the moment of the construction of modernity, we are precisely living in the time of the construction of the notion of time. The point is then, that from this angle, any museum, even a museum of ancient history, but also a museum of a specific kind of art or a specific kind of science, is at the same time a museum of modernity: It presents our modern understanding of time, and it presents our understanding of negativity and affirmation, our understanding of differences and relations. Any museum in this sense presents a construction of contradictions and antagonisms.

The second consequence for the museum is about the question of the market.

Here it is important to underline the fact that the invisible is not exchangeable. Of course, we have developed forms in which especially contemporary art that is working in the realm of the invisible is still manageable as an object of the market. But the invisible is a category that pertains to all works of art, not only to those that materially do not leave traces. The invisible is the moment in a work of art that cannot be exchanged. It is the singularity of form that is missed by the commodity form because it is useless and because it is inobjective as we might call it. The task of the museum is not to reproduce the object, but to offer a space for its invisibility, its becoming. The museum therefore needs to become a force that is explicitly directed against the force of the market, only then might it be able to abstain from being a representative institution of official art only.

Third, we get to the question of the state, maybe one of the most difficult questions today. If we understand the state as a form of representation, we will have to ask what an institution could be which is not bound to the form of representation. One answer would be to understand the museum as a site of presentation instead of representation, i.e. as a site of the becoming of art. But maybe this is too quick, as we should admit that there is also the function of conservation that belongs to the museum. How can we conserve an art in its becoming? Once we change our understanding of modernity and focus on its inherent affirmationism, we open a subjective relation to art that enables us to understand it in its quality of becoming again. Thus, the museum undermines its function as an ideological state apparatus by a constant intervention against the dominant forms of what exists, by emphasizing the weak forms of becoming. The museum will not conserve, but keep the weak force active.

Finally, we can propose to understand the museum as a site of an intervention. From the point of modernity – from the point of a different modernity – the museum intervenes in the regime of time, it intervenes in the reigns of the existing forms, and thereby presents something

inexchangeable and withdrawn from the market of exchangeable commodities. The museum, then, as an institution, will not be able to rely on a set of facts, on the rules of the canon, or on the consensus of the public opinion. It will have to create its own practice as a practice of an intervention. A museum that intervenes will first and foremost intervene into its own setting.

The museum thus presents a highly problematic scene. As it is an institution, it is necessary at the same time that the museum rests on a *stability* of its judgment; it is necessary that it is *recognizable* in its stability, and it is necessary that it creates a *fixed localization* for the stabilized judgment and the recognition of this judgment. The museum, in other words, is inherently conservative. It needs to have a building, its rules, its permanence, and its duration. The museum as a site of intervention seems to be the opposite of the museum as an institution. But still, this inherent conservatism does not all make it impossible to gather objects without knowledge – to gather them solely for the structural point that these objects present new forms of intervention into the realm of the existent. The conservatism of the museum does not contradict its modern function to gather objects without representing them by knowledge, without integrating them in the forms of the existent. The conservatism of the museum does not contradict its function to address the inobjectivity of its objects. Rather, the museum as a conservative, stable, localized shelter of the inobjective would be a simple and naked place. Its truly modern task would be to permanently intervene in its own setting, disrupting the stonework of knowledge that time has built around it, to conserve its simplicity and the affirmation of the becoming, to create the split in time.

As such, the museum would be a proper philosophical site.







*Shuddhabrata Sengupta*

## Infinity on Trial: The Notional Museum

Inside the museums, infinity goes up on trial  
Voices echo this is what salvation must be like after a while  
Bob Dylan, 'Visions of Johanna'

In many Indian languages, the word for ghost, *bhoot*, is also a word for the past, as well as for the material substance of things. Following from this, we could say – “if history is a ghost story, it must also lay the foundations of a metaphysics of the future.”

Orhan Pamuk calls museums apparatuses for turning time into space. The space of most museums takes up a lot of time. As one of the three members of a collective art practice that often enters a museum through the back door, or the ‘staff entrance’, while installing art work, or researching objects and documents in the basement or storage area, I have known what it takes to be reduced to near insignificance in the sprawling labyrinth of most museums. It is for this reason that I am drawn repeatedly, sometimes in actuality, at other times in memory, to a re-viewing of a sequence in Jean-Luc Godard’s film, *Bande à part*, in which two men and a woman run breathlessly through the halls and corridors of the Louvre in Paris, past masterpieces and their guards, who look on, as if puzzled by the trio’s effort to escape. Whenever I see this clip, usually on YouTube or in dreams, I am reminded of my collective’s repeated transit and sojourn through museums. I wonder what we are running from, and what we are running towards. I wonder who or what gives us chase.

Does this mean that a ghost of the past is always threatening to catch up with spectres from the future somewhere in the corridors of a museum? Would admitting to such a possibility amount to turning a museum into somewhat of a hybrid between a reliquary, a haunted house, a laboratory and a time machine? If a museum time-machine could take

us into a future, what kind of past must it leave behind? What are we escaping?

Colloquially, a museum was once also called a *jaadu-ghar* (house of magic) or an *ajaib-ghar* (house of wonder) in many South Asian languages, which comes directly from the sense of museum as ‘wunderkammer’. It is only much later, when the state grows flabby and feels that it has something to imprison by way of culture that the museum (which becomes state property) turns into a *sangrahalaya* – a house of collections. At its origin, the museum in South Asia was haunted by the wonder that it received from its public. And so it is towards wonder that we should turn if we are to meditate on its future.

We tend to think of museums today as conservative spaces, nervous of letting go of their authoritative interpretations of time and their hold on memory. But at their inception, conservatives detested museums for being way too radical, as apparatuses that tore art and culture out of its often originally sacred context, desacralizing it, and turning it into objects of secular, abstracted contemplation. What seemed like iconophilia to the enraptured secular museum visitor in front of an ex-religious and now pristinely aesthetic artefact, could appear as iconoclasm to the traditionalist. In time however, these newly inaugurated modern ‘secular’ spaces began to resemble medieval churches and cathedrals, and even ancient temples. The art historian Carol Duncan even spoke of the museum as a space of ritual. The hushed silences in a museum begin to acquire a monastic character, and its pedestals begin to resemble altars. The injunction not to touch the works of art, with which every museum admonishes every visitor, effectively removes their collections from the plane of everyday life where they may have once belonged to a transcendent supra-sensory realm, seemingly outside time and history, even though they are dated and annotated to the T. The museum becomes a factory for the processing of the the sacred into the profane, and that which was once sacred and is now rendered profane is then transformed back into a new, exalted kind of spectral, sacred, secular-ity. Even today, the National Museum in Delhi, which houses a relic of the Buddha in its Buddhist Art Gallery, has to ‘manage’ the frequent

prostrations of visitors who turn suddenly into pilgrims. It has to find ways to dispose of votive offerings to the relic. The museum may have begun as one thing, but somewhere along the way, it turned into quite another.

As Bob Dylan tells in his nasal twang – ‘this is what salvation looked like, after a while’.

It is not surprising then that middle class and petit bourgeois households the world over, but also especially in Indian metropolitan cities and small towns began curating a portion of the wall space of their twentieth century living rooms and parlours into mini-museums in an effort to purchase a dram of transcendence, ensconced nicely within domesticity. The glass fronted ‘showcase’ – a vitrine boxed into a wall, with a few shelves for the storage and display of knick knacks, souvenirs, trophies and sacred and secular icons – became the notional museum of the new citizen’s home. If the ‘national museum’ in the nation’s capital became the reliquary of the nation’s top ten relics, then the notional museum of the drawing room showcase became the middle class family’s display platform for everything from grandfather’s portrait to grandson’s medal, with a replica Taj Mahal, a film’s star’s autographed face, a sea shell and a doll or animal figure denoting the marginal presence or increasing absence of some unfortunate indigenous population at a safe distance from the metropolitan family’s tryst with modernity.

Sometimes, this tension between different kinds of sacredness writ large in the museum can have interesting consequences. We know for instance that the early medieval Tamil Shaivite devotional poet Nandanar was forbidden to even glimpse the icon of *Siva*, the god he was devoted to, because he belonged to an untouchable caste. When Nandanar mustered the courage to enter the sanctum sanctorum of the famous Nataraja temple in Chidambaram, the mere fact of having gazed upon the idol caused him to disappear into the image. Vision rendered the seer invisible. Today, there are many resplendent Chola Bronze *Natarajas* (dancing figures of Siva) in the National Museum. A twenty first century Nandanar can walk in their presence without being

rendered invisible. A Dalit man or woman can enter the museum, and encounter an icon they were forbidden to be in the presence of even a mere hundred years ago. Does the person who enters the museum as a Dalit, exit it also as an untouchable? Something causes the acts of seeing, the status of what is seen, and the identity of the person who does the seeing, to be transformed by the many new and different ways in which vision itself is produced within the museum. The accumulation of these acts of seeing incrementally generates a new set of futures. The person who enters the museum as a Dalit may exit it by changing what is seen in the museum. That alteration transforms the viewer as much as it reconfigures what is seen.

If you leave the museum a different person from the one who entered it, what happens to the person that was you when you entered? Do they get left behind? Does he or she get trapped like a ghost would in the museum machine, wandering the labyrinth like a threadless Theseus, chasing, and being chased by a phantom Minotaur? Is that why, when alone in a room in a museum, you always feel that there are eyes watching you, and they do not belong only to the icons on display, or the security cameras, or the docent asleep in the chair in the corner? Could it be that we leave little fragments of our discarded, unaltered consciousness to hover and watch over each other in museums?

#### MUSEUMS CHANGE THE STORIES WE TELL ABOUT OURSELVES. ALL THE TIME.

As it happens, Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay, the first native born Assistant Curator of the Indian Museum in Calcutta (which opened its doors in 1814) was also an avid collector and writer of Bengali ghost stories. If museums are populated by the past (as Trailokyanath knew only too well), then it also takes a teller of ghostly tales like him to leave us with the possibility that haunting might also be a means with which to face the future. At least that is what comes across if we tune into some of the more absurd amongst Trailokyanath's ghost stories. Here, in 'Muktomala' or 'The Pearl Necklace' we have a ghost, a skull-goblin-*betala* that puts people to the test. The *betala* says –

“Listen, we are *betalas*. We are out of tune and out of time. We like puzzles and problems, riddles and rhymes. If I give you a tough nut to crack, a really difficult problem, can you solve it like the great King Vikramaditya did when faced with our illustrious predecessor, the Great Betala of the twenty five riddles”

The story goes on. The narrator admits –

‘No sir! I don’t have that ability. I am just an ignorant bumpkin. I don’t know how to solve riddles or to tell stories.’

Then skull-*betala* frowned and said, ‘You cannot answer riddles, you can’t spin a decent yarn. You’re good for nothing. But you’d still want me to knock my skull against my neighbour’s ghost bones. What nonsense is that?’

Supposing we read this little exchange as a parable, and supposing we said that the story was basically an allegorical treatment of the interrogation of a museum curator by the objects in his custody. Then, we could say that the objects were basically asking the curator – “Look at us, and tell us what you hear when you find our bones knocking against each other in the vitrines.”

What indeed can one hear under the crackle of different epochs rubbing up against each other in a museum collection? Does it tell us a story in which all the pieces fit neatly together like a solved jigsaw puzzle? Or is the story it tells an amalgam of serrated, uneven, uneasy edges?

The state of our museums today points us in the direction of dusty but completed jigsaw puzzles. They offer a banal pattern of civilizational greatness, of continuity, of a pattern that culminates in the nation state’s embrace of the infinity of time past.

What do I mean by this? Let me try and think through an example from the collection of the National Museum in Delhi.

Every time I visit the National Museum in Delhi, I am drawn to a small ten and a half centimeter long cast bronze figurine in the Harappan/Indus Valley Civilization gallery located on the ground floor. I think it speaks in whispers, not just to me, but to everyone who might care to stop and listen instead of just walking by. I am referring to the object

indexed as Acc. No. HR-5721/195, commonly known as 'Dancing Girl' found by the archaeologist D.R. Sahni in 1926-27 in a broken-down house in the 'ninth lane' of the area designated as HR of the Indus valley city of Mohenjodaro.

Not far from the glass case where this object is kept lie the skeletal remains of a woman from an Indus Valley site. The bones are arranged as if they have just been exposed during a dig. Looking at the aslant jawbone of the exposed skeleton I cannot help thinking to myself about the possibility that the miniature woman in bronze may be an actual portrait of a human being. I know, that somewhere in the National Museum in Karachi, Pakistan, there is another bronze figure, numbered DK-12728 found by Ernest Mackay in 1930-31 in the late level II of the civilization in Room 81, House X, Block 9 of the area of Mohenjodaro designated as DK-G. DK-12728 in Karachi is a twin of HR- 5721/195 in Delhi, and is somewhat unfairly nicknamed the 'ugly sister'. Could these two tiny women in bronze, locked behind glass in two national museums, now separated by a militarized border, have been modeled after two actual human beings, who lived, loved, danced, breathed and died like human beings always do? Could their mitochondrial DNA still be coursing through many women alive today, burning calories into energy in countless cells? Could there be a tantalizingly unbroken chain of causes and consequences that directly link the present realities experienced by human beings today to that distant past? Could our distant 'past,' which was the actual 'present' of two women in an Indus valley city, who may or may not have been sisters, work its way into what would become the remote, scattered 'future' inheritance of a four and a half some thousand year old material culture?

The National Museum website lists No. 5721/195 as "One of the rarest artefacts world-over" and goes on to describe it as "...a unique blend of antiqueness and art indexing the lifestyle, taste and cultural excellence of a people in such remote past as about five millenniums from now, the tiny bronze-cast, the statue of a young lady now unanimously called 'Indus dancing girl', represents a stylistically poised female figure performing a dance."



*The Dancing Girl of Mohenjodaro;*  
2300-1750 BC; bronze; height: 10.8 cm.

NATIONAL MUSEUM, NEW DELHI  
IMAGE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The word that strikes me most in the above description is ‘unanimously’. We are not told how and why the curators of the National Museum divined that the figure is now ‘unanimously’ a dancing girl. The archaeologist who excavated her, John Marshall, spoke of the ‘insouciant’ gesture of the standing female figure. Another British Archaeologist, Mortimer Wheeler, even spoke of her ‘Baluchi-style face with pouting lips and insolent look in the eye’. Gregory Possehl said of the statuette – “We may not be certain that she was a dancer, but she was good at what she did and she knew it.”

Recently, the narrative around the woman of ‘ninth lane’ of Mohenjodaro has morphed again. The contemporary desire to see everything in ancient South Asia reflected through the lens of resurgent Hindutva has led a new kind of historian, unencumbered by the embarrassment of having to furnish evidence to claim that object No. 5721/195 is an early form of the later Hindu goddess Parvati.

A museum ensures that a ten and a half centimeter figurine can be the bearer of an archaeologist’s fantasy as well as the vehicle of a religious revivalist’s wet dream. The museum offers the object to each visitor, curious or not, prejudiced or not, with a pretended equanimity. Each

constructs a different future from the same past. The moment that arrests a turn in a *nautch* girl's dance step for one scholar becomes a goddess with one arm akimbo for another interpreter. Occasionally, it can also be the more sober bearer of a poet's reflection. Here, for instance, is yet another twist in the tale of the four and half thousand year young woman in bronze.

The Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali wrote a terse encomium to object No. HR-5721/195. It is titled, simply, and appropriately, 'At the Museum'. Agha Shahid Ali asks, as if interrupted mid sentence, in the first of twenty odd hemistiches -

But in 2500 B.C. Harappa,  
who cast in bronze a servant girl?  
No one keeps records  
of soldiers and slaves.

The sculptor knew this,  
polishing the ache  
Off her fingers stiff  
from washing the walls  
and scrubbing the floors,  
from stirring the meat  
and the crushed asafoetida  
in the bitter gourd.

But I'm grateful she smiled  
at the sculptor,  
as she smiles at me  
in bronze,  
a child who had to play woman  
to her lord  
when the warm June rains  
came to Harappa.

A poem turns Mohenjodaro into Harappa, as it easily might turn Delhi into Lahore, and the display of one museum into the storage of another. Ghosts are shape shifters. Bones get mixed up when you dig for them.



The museum is a crime scene waiting for the patient detective and the poet of the future.

Whereas all museums are repositories of objects that are forgotten, either because they are too well known or not known at all, or of what needs to be remembered, the museum itself is hardly ever treated as an object in its own right. We need to wonder about what a museum is, in order to think about what it yet may be. We need to stare at the showcase inset into the walls of our homes for a very long time to understand who we became as we arranged each souvenir.

The museum is more than just a storehouse. Like I said, it is also the scene of a crime. In our time, in India especially, the museum transforms objects that gather to it into pieces of evidence in the case of the honour killing of civilizations at the hand of nationalism. This takes the form of transforming things we do not know much about, like a bronze figure of a naked young woman, into an idea that some of us simply won't let go of – that the Indus Valley was settled by 'Vedic' Aryans.

But this case, like so many others, has been fixed in advance. The museum has turned into more than a crime scene of strangled artifacts. It is now also the courtroom where the trial of the nation for the murder of the infinitude of material cultures leads to acquittal. What gets written into the trial's proceedings, becomes the nation's new ancestral narrative. This is what the museum today puts out as knowledge, as history. We are told that our ancestors will save us. The museum pronounces this salvation in an effort to appease the ancestral spirits. And at home, we light incense in front of grandpa's portrait on the occasional new moon.

But no matter what a museum puts out as its story, this is never going to happen. The ghosts in the museum, and in the showcase are not at peace. They cannot be. They are planning revolts. The question of the future of the museum is also a question about the way the past will not let itself lie low when confronted with stabilizing narratives.

Consequently, there is a crying need for museums, or museum like spaces, that also propose to anticipate all that is yet to come, instead

of just doing retrospectively forensic acts of cosmetic makeover. The museum as an institution needs to look ahead towards the riddles that will be best by tomorrow. By doing this, museums will help us to undertake the difficult task of remembering to make room for what we do not yet know. Our ignorance will always be miles ahead of our knowledge.

Museums need to admit a certain amount of necessary ignorance into their corridors and galleries. By ignorance, I do not mean false knowledge, or pretended certainties. I mean the acceptance of the fact that our knowledge of the past is incomplete. I argue for this acceptance not to tarnish what is certain, but to remember that a great deal about the past is, and will always remain a mystery, and so the drawing up of clear conclusions is an act of myth-making, post factum. The museum that spells out everything knows nothing. It does not know that it does not know the past. We may know the ambitions of our grandfathers, but we do not know the secret desires of our grandmothers.

- The museum of the future will be a philosophical playground.
- The museum of the future will be a theatre for the rehearsal of unrealizable historical propositions.
- The museum of the future will be a crime scene perpetually under investigation.
- The museum of the future will be a workshop for the repair of broken enquiries.
- The museum of the future will be a garage for unlikely transports between ages.
- The museum of the future will be a warehouse for the storage of unresolved questions.
- The museum of the future will be a terminus where the trains from tomorrow will arrive on time today.
- The museum of the future will be a spaceship for journeys into inner space and outer time.

- The museum of the future will be an agora where solitude will be exchanged for solidarity.
- The museum of the future will be a hospice where dated concepts will go to leave the world in peace.
- The museum of the future will be a club house for retired civilizing missions.
- The museum of the future will be a studio for those who don't yet know they are artists.
- The museum of the future will be a hothouse for the cultivation of rare life forms of the mind.
- The museum of the future will be a hideout for fugitive good ideas.
- The museum of the future will be a penitentiary for cultural arrogances.
- The museum of the future will be a school for unlearning identitarian formulae.
- The museum of the future will be a library of misunderstood wall texts.
- The museum of the future will be an archive of forgotten proclamations about all that needs doing.
- The museum of the future will be a calendar of historical missed opportunities.
- The museum of the future will be a brothel for glamorous defeats and discounted victories.
- The museum of the future will be a switchboard for art forms, memories and histories to connect, disconnect and reconnect with each other and their extant or yet to be publics.
- The museum of the future will be more of a notional and less of a national museum.

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*Cíntia Guedes and Iki Yos Piña Narváez*

Fighting for the future has always been  
our act of persistence of the desire  
to live

Translated by Zoë Perry

I THE CAPTURE

**Iki yos** – I feel like in order to talk about the future of museums one must talk about the past—not in a linear relationship to time, but in multiple dimensions of time and space—about colonial pasts and fleeting presents, or presents that reactivate the colonial past and futures, in the plural. I am not an expert on museums, nor do I want to be. I've always been afraid of those spaces. Because of the disciplining of the bodies who enter them, because of the dictatorship of silence, and the speaking in whispers that is also uncomfortable for those who guard the collections.

When I was little, my mother took me to the Museo de Ciencias Naturales [Museum of Natural Sciences] in Caracas, Venezuela, where there were many rocks, minerals, plants, fossils. It is one of city's oldest museums, founded by the German botanist, Adolfo Ernst, in 1874. This museum was a response to the obsession of white European explorers to classify, collect, and hoard; and the obsession of nation-states as a successful project of coloniality to give value to procedures and protocols that emulate Europe in its image and likeness. This museum, like the rest of the museums I have (un)fortunately internalized in my body, builds up the subjectivity of the colonizer, the heroism of “white saviors”, the cishet, white supremacist ontology, which, in turn, builds structures for the imprisonment of species and cultural legacies, which they, European whites, have decided to deprive of freedom.

The coloniality of knowledge takes place between walls: the Museo de Ciencias Naturales operated as a space to promulgate a range of

botanical, ethnographic, and anthropological works on the indigenous peoples of La Guajira—Ayamanes and Warao—studied by German “explorers”, such as Ernst and Humboldt. These structures have social validation, because in the colonial imaginary we are grateful to German white supremacy for “giving us knowledge”, “for enlightening us”, for creating blueprints for interpreting the world based on oculo-centric logic, on “plantation visuality”<sup>1</sup>, under the accumulative, extractivist, and imprisonment logic.

**Cíntia Guedes** – More than being interested in museums, I'm interested in the fate of the images. I think of it as a research problem, but mostly as a problem relative to my own life and the life of the communities with which I share positions in the world. I have repeatedly asked myself a question that is perhaps related to the theme of this conversation: in the end, who survives *in* images and who survives *the* images, which are hoisted onto a pedestal and monumentalized? Whenever this question, circumscribed in a clear aesthetic definition of ethics and politics, is put forward, the colonial trap is remade. So, no, we aren't experts on museums, but our future is closely linked to the future of images. And in the world as we know it, the museum is an institution, moving between the disciplines of art and anthropology, that concerns itself with the ways images are organized and preserved, but also the way sensibilities are developed. In a museum, sensitive specters gain materiality and matter holds the ability to traverse time. You say you went to the museum with your mother as a child, when I was a child it was an established school field trip. It was only after I went to live in Rio de Janeiro, and came face-to-face with the magnificence of the buildings that house some of the city's art institutions, that I consciously experienced the span of the decay. Walking through the former capital of imperial Brazil and encountering these gilded buildings, knowing that this matter is the synthesis of the work of enslaved people, was a disturbing image of

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<sup>1</sup> Concept developed by Riley Snorton in an analysis of the genealogy of the speculum and obstetrics. Snorton alludes to the ordering of the world from “what can be seen.” He establishes a relationship between white supremacy and construction of the visible from experimentation on black bodies.

the presence of the colonial past. Pillaging and burying, however, aren't just the habits of the city's century-old institutions.

The Museu de Arte do Rio [Rio Art Museum] opened its doors in 2013, and the Museu do Amanhã [Museum of Tomorrow], in 2015. These two cultural ventures are the result of a partnership between the city of Rio de Janeiro and the Marinho family, owners of Organizações Globo, the largest media and communications conglomerate in Brazil. Both were built in the city's port area and are part of the Porto Maravilha project [Wonder Port project], which carried out a large number of land expropriations and forcibly removed hundreds of families from their homes so that these museums could feature as conciliatory monuments on the land that was once the largest arrival port for enslaved Black Africans. Today, Porto Maravilha welcomes international tourists on cruiseships.

These two museums are intended to be conciliatory landmarks, both architecturally and symbolically. They raise the insignia of a dictated future, but dictated by whom? The neighborhood where they're located is called Pequena África [Little Africa], because it was the area where people from Africa who had won their freedom used to make their home. It was therefore some of their descendants who, under protest and great resistance, were forced to leave their homes and make room for the facilities of these so-called “bold” museums. Evictions in the neighborhood in the early 2010s affected hundreds of families in Morro da Providência, Brazil's oldest favela, uncoincidentally. Also not by coincidence was the Museu de Arte do Rio opening exhibition, *O abrigo e o terreno: arte e sociedade no Brasil I* [Shelter and Land: Art of Society in Brazil I], curated by Clarissa Diniz, and which highlighted themes such as disputes over urban space, evictions, favelas and works originating from the encounters of several artist collectives and the Prestes Maia occupation in São Paulo. Cynically-speaking, the museum surrounds and encircles what surrounds it. It's funny, because there are other cultural spaces in the area that are dedicated to the ancestral memory of these same people, such as the Instituto de Pesquisa e Memória Pretos Novos [Pretos Novos Research and Memory Institute]

and the Centro Cultural Pequeña África [Pequeña África Cultural Center]. They act as guardians of knowledge, objects, and the material remains of these people, but these spaces are continually neglected by government authorities, precisely because through them it is only possible, despite any possibility of conciliation, to project a future which features an image of social and racial justice.

In your text, *La fantasía de asaltar el museo*<sup>2</sup> [The Fantasy of Robbing the Museum], you outline how the images stolen by colonial museums have been put at the service of edifying a colonial experience of time. And then, I'm reminded of the philosophy of Denise Ferreira da Silva, when she illustrates that the way time is perceived is the result of a modern/colonial philosophical operation, which offers temporal intuition as a sequential order that, when created as history from a causal and effective narrative, says that the present is a determination of the past, and that this is an untouchable, remote, and inoperative entity. Mostly, when we experience time as a continuous line, going from past to present to future, the museum begins to constitute, as you put it, a "racial repository of memory", for which the fate of Black bodies is death—whether representing the "past" and "primitive" inside archives and archeology museums; finding annihilation by the exaltation of the "beautiful", which in fine art museums is white; or even being evicted or buried. This is how modern racial grammar conforms, in which we are the fruit of irremediable tragedies, and at present only the thankless function of seeking reparation remains, which deviates from the task of imagining future multiples of life in abundance. However, as you also commented in *La fantasía*, the experience of temporal linearity is potentially broken each time racialized bodies and dissidents of heteronormative ideology enter museums, precisely because the sensations metabolized by these bodies, in the face of what the West has deemed "beautiful", is radically different; and that is why the museum, as we

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<sup>2</sup> NARVÁEZ, Iki Yos Piña. *La fantasía de asaltar el museo*. Devuélvannos el oro. Cosmovisiones perversas y acciones anticoloniales. Madrid, España: Colectivo Ayllu, October 2018.



know it, in its work constructing white cis-het subjectivity, is a building of coloniality that can be made to fail.

## II THE ESCAPE

**IY** – Fighting for the future has always been our act of persistence of the desire to live. I'm also concerned with the living pieces in this prison called museum. And as we are transtemporeal Blacks, I activate my ancestral force for the abolition of plantations, prisons, and museums as colonial structures enmeshed in the industrial prison system. I activate anti-colonial dreams as I write this text in Barcelona, in the midst of a pandemic, at the home of Guariota, an Afro-Indigenous lesbian friend who plays Grand Theft Auto GTA on PlayStation, fictionalizing daring getaways. I also imagine these getaways, where the “Esmeralda mulatxs”, [“Mulattos of Esmeraldas”] prisoners of the Museo de América de Madrid [Museum of the Americas, Madrid], the Taíno axes, and the guacamayas (parrots) fly nimbly. They escape. A grand, explosive getaway in the best GTA-style, a non-harmonic getaway, to a soundtrack with funk, rap, reggaetón afro-beat. An escape that involves loss and pain, like the process of colonization.

As a cimarrón body I am always on the run, a border-migrant body, a trans/transvestite body. To think about the future is to think about the abolition of all the structures that prevent our bodies from existing. To think about a non-heteronormalized, non-cisgendered future. To think about abolishing all prison structures: the sex-gender system as a prison, the prison industrial system, museums as prisons. These are my anti-colonial dreams, anti-captivity dreams.

**CG** – Yes! In our dreams of running away we can abound in life, escape to an undetermined space-time, be a mutant and position ourselves precisely after the denunciation and before what will come as a new capture. In front of the museum as we know it, my dreams appear only as exercises to welcome feelings of anger and a desire for revenge that courses through my body when I visit these spaces. I welcome them, because they are also ways of studying captivity. These collections of

feelings that were not foreseen by the museum guides, I perceive them as developed, for example, in the anti-colonial actions that you from Colectivo Ayllu<sup>3</sup> perform in museums, because in them I find evidence that, in spite of everything informed by the archives, we are living beings beyond the modern-colonial ontological measures with which museums invite us to experience our (in)existence.



*'We chose this Future' by iki yos piña narváez*

IV – In 2018, with Colectivo Ayllu, I performed several poetic interventions and anti-colonial actions at institutions of pain in Spain. To enter these structures is to be in a temporality of reactivating trauma and the colonial wound. Entering the Museo de América in Madrid, means entering the prisons of our sacred objects. The Museo de América, created in 1941, during Francoism, is a repository of the racial memory of Spanish colonialism in Abya Yala, bringing together more than 25 thousand items, of which not even 10% are on display. The account written by the lord of the land, as well as a large part of his colonial loot are housed there, preserved and kept up to date. At the Museo

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<sup>3</sup> Collaborative research and artistic political action group of migrants and sexual dissidents based in Spain.

de América, coloniality has been converted into “sculpture”, blurring the vital weight of worship of many of the objects that were stolen and displayed there. The white institution seeks to aestheticize plunder, pain, to fetishize otherness, the Eurocentric obsession with collecting and hoarding.

I'm thinking of dismantling pain. De-statuizing colonial heroism and putting an end to the “phantom limb” narrative. This symptomatology of the presence of the wrested organ. That wrested organ will be the toppled statues and the shattered statues. I know that when a colonial item disappears, the pedestal remains and the effect of the phantom limb is activated. Before this power, transvestite macumba will protect our lives and chase away the lost souls of the colonists.

**CG** – When you speak of “de-statuizing colonial heroism and putting an end to the narrative of the 'phantom limb'” I think that that narrative recenters the museum in service of the colonial project in reaffirming defeats. Museums, in their anthropological gestures, serve to constantly remind us of the looting that has been done. So what can you actually do with them? It seems to me that de-statuizing the museum is related both to the dismantling of museification policies of Black bodies, ideas and memories, those of us who are classified as collectable, and also to the imagination of these spaces from a radically different perspective of coloniality and one much older than it, which is making use of archive technologies to move through time. In other words, approaching the things of the world and being moved by them, without necessarily possessing or stacking them up. I was thinking about a museum whose collection, archive, material, and bodies were not the thing itself, because our problem is not the things themselves, but the domination of memory, history, the passage of time. And to me it makes a lot of sense when you propose a “museum of absence” or an “invisible museum”, because in order for the answer to the future of museums not to be an institution that once again edifies our defeat, even in an attempt to repair our absence, it must be an open-ended path. And in order for these escape routes to continue to work, they cannot be fully available, encodable, transparent images. I think that “absence” in the

museum—stuck by producing “presences” and putting “things” in the place of other “things”, in operations of representation—may be the first refusal to participate in the game. But I imagine that it doesn't merely empty the museum space, just as the “museum of the invisible” does not mean simply “showing nothing”. Perhaps it has to do with encryptions, encrypted images, which demand other means of engagement and types of interaction. Or else it has to do with the images that celebrate the fact that we have survived museums and the colonial project. After all, is it possible to think about the future of a museum that does not bring about the coloniality of sensations?

**IV** – I thought about making a museum of absence; of breaking away from all stolen artifacts. I thought about building a visual account of the escape. An oral account of the escape by the pieces that were returned or that managed to exist outside the idea of an archive that is linked to the idea of ownership.

The town where my mother lives is called Cagua. Cagua: voice of the Cumanagoto ethnic group that means “land of the snail”, in Caguacao (Cahigua), located in Aragua State, on the outskirts of Caracas, capital of what is now called Venezuela. There are no museums in this town. That doesn't mean that there is no memory, that there is no history. One of the highest hills in this region is called “el empalao”. It was a colonial punishment site, for impaling members of the Comunagoto community. Impalement is a heterosexual technique that penalizes the unspeakable sin of sodomy. It consists of driving a stake through the anus and destroying the entire intestine until the victim bleeds. These stories of colonial massacre persevere in the collective memory through orality, through continuing to escape the past. The archive is not hijacked by rigid structures that hijack the stories.

I'm also reminded of the experience of the Museo Travesti do Peru [Transvestite Museum of Peru], created by Giuseppe Campuzano. A museum made of remnants, like transvestite bodies. Fragments of ancestral history and contemporary transvestites who used to be here and are no longer. A museum with fragile walls, pieces of pain



*'Museum of Absence' by iki yos piña narváez*

and memory that resist the colonial cisgendering agenda. “My need wants to transcend the binary (center-periphery, man-woman, dictatorship-democracy, inside-outside the closet) based on transvestites as a mnemotechnical strategy and as sexualized marginality in order to deconstruct a centralized and domesticated Peru.”<sup>4</sup> Campuzano shifts the binarism of the museum's existence or non-existence to a transvestite museum, to a non-prison museum, to an ancestral and non-hetero-centric museum.

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<sup>4</sup> Campuzano, G. and Godoy, F. (2013 [2011]). ‘Travestirme de museo para travestir al museo’: Interview with Giuseppe Campuzano. *Arara*, 11, 1-11. Retrieved from [https://www1.essex.ac.uk/arhistory/research/pdfs/arara\\_issue\\_11/godoy.pdf](https://www1.essex.ac.uk/arhistory/research/pdfs/arara_issue_11/godoy.pdf)

*Paulina E. Varas*

## The problem was normality.

Notes-forces for imagining nomadic institutions in  
the Chilean landscape

Translated by Zafira Petersen

It may be true and capitalism makes us  
believe in it so strongly, that it is time to direct our  
gaze towards that in which we believe and that which  
affects us.

Natalia Ortiz

“Until life is worth living.” A street slogan and a deep cry for survival. Chanted by a multitude of people during the Chilean protests in October 2019, it manifests itself as a great seismic movement of a present where a life attainable for everyone is not guaranteed. The current effects of the neoliberal system are unimaginable. I am writing this text from Chile, where, ever since that moment, we have witnessed a popular and social uprising of inconceivable intensity and whose actions and repression have reverberated across the globe. Multiple expressions from the streets have become ephemeral memories of a transversal movement where diverse social struggles have emerged and have been rekindled. The scribblings on the walls, graphic images, collective performances, etc. all voice the discontentment with the system shared by the vast majority of Chilean society. People are investing their hope in the collective creativity of the streets, which, notwithstanding, still coexists with the horrific police violence of a state who is deaf to its citizens' demands. In those days, another slogan caught my eye: “Neoliberalism was born in Chile and will die in Chile.” Is it possible to imagine that we are facing a new scenario, unimaginable only months ago? How is this social condition affecting our practices and reflections in the reality we are living? In these stages of insurgency, we also touch upon our own frailty and vulnerability. And in the face of an uncer-

tain future, where social life forms are questioned, alarms go off in our subjectivity, and a type of force that was hidden until now, reverberates in our bodies. Our capacity to capture forces that bear witness to the ebb and flow of our subjective and collective desires in movement, micropolitics of intensities and sensations also rising and falling, connect ancient times, and bring the wounds of other repressive pasts to the surface. Military in the streets, rampant police, mutilated bodies, mutilated eyes. A fear from times past appears, coexisting with a new, present fear of that violence. But the force survives and the bodies resist being subjected once more.

After decades of repression, the bodies in the streets now march side by side, brushing against one another in the large protests that take place every day. These are spaces of individual composition and recomposition where practices of co-creation can take on a new meaning. In this reality, impacting existence, art and politics are reconfigured. “*Understanding what some call multitude, uprising, call. Here, we name it ‘cry’.* *Understanding the roar, another world is possible, to prolong it.*”<sup>1</sup> Activating this effort and situated thought would encourage heterogeneous reflections, which in turn would allow us to situate ourselves precisely in the diversity of our practices and to value these forms of construction of a common space. Encourage a thought experiment aimed at generating a type of knowledge which assumes these phenomena from specific connections according to what philosopher Donna Haraway proposes as “situated thought” and is linked to feminist traditions of the construction of critical thought. Haraway’s notion is also closely linked to thought traditions that, in the South, are vital to consider in relation to what the Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui describes as “*a practice and an ethos, typical of the Ch’ixi mestizaje, which (re)cognizes its inner indix and is firmly situated in the here and now of its land and landscape.*”<sup>2</sup> Especially considering, as

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<sup>1</sup> Natalia Ortiz, “Embrujos y contraembrujos. Palabras para la edición castellana de La Brujería Capitalista” in: Isabelle Stengers y Philippe Pignard *La Brujería Capitalista*, Buenos Aires: Hekht ediciones, 2018. p.11.

<sup>2</sup> Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. *Un mundo ch’ixi es posible. Ensayos desde un*

the author points out, that the colonial does not generate heterogeneity and kaleidoscopic differences, nor does it cultivate citizenship or democratic public spheres.

### ONE SQUARE, OUR LIVES

Very close to the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes [National Museum of Fine Arts] in Santiago is the *Plaza de la Dignidad* (Dignity Square), thus renamed by the people after 15 October 2019. It is a meeting place and a space for voicing the frustration with the highly stratified Chilean social and economic system. The square has appeared in many photographs and videos from the daily demonstrations that took place in the city until the global pandemic hit. Its name was changed from the former “Baquedano Square” which, as is the case in many of our cities, is reminiscent of historic military characters. Renaming the square contained a gesture of facing the official history, and so linking the plaza with the term “of dignity” better reflects the ongoing struggle. The appeal to the dignity of life is no doubt related to the slogan known from the feminist demands “for a life worth living”; an appeal that involves caring for life-forms, for the access to our rights, and the recognition of our memories and emancipatory legacies.

After the insurgent movements in Chile, a pulsation still remains, and each collective cry activates sensations in our bodies; memories that continue to affect us. The unimaginable appears from something we didn't think we would ever experience. For those of us who grew under the Chilean dictatorship, the question of the human condition weaves specific and singular webs of meaning that mixes with our own stories. “*They speak of personal history as if such a thing were possible. Like that which takes place in a social/historic/political landscape,*”<sup>3</sup> under this possibility of establishing a dialogue between these landscapes and the personal memories, indivisible from the context in which they

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*presente en crisis*. Buenos Aires, Tinta Limón, 2018. p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> Victoria Larrosa. *Curandería. Escucha clínica, performática y gualichera*, Buenos Aires: editorial Hekht, 2018. p. 42.



emerged, an oscillating dialogue that rises and falls, grazing certain parts, activating memories, knowledge, resistances, ways to sustain us. The first question that arises: What *kind* of life? For those of us born in the early years of the dictatorship, this question has multiple and far-reaching answers. I was born in 1975, on a night when the city was under curfew. Leaving the house came at the risk of being arrested by the military forces controlling the city. I imagine the scene: My mother, about to give birth any minute, walking beside my father through the besieged capital to get to the hospital despite the looming fear of repression. They are questioning the military order in the city because a desire for life, for defending it, has been installed in them. It is not about defending some specific idea; rather, it grows from a desire, an intuition, animal instinct. Situations like these marked the biography of many of us in the midst of this violence permeating the demarcated, controlled and closed city. Still, life continues to flow, resisting any oppression. What *kind* of life, then? Being born, while others disappear. We who survive this violence are horrified by the disappearances of people under the Chilean dictatorship, intertwined as they are with our birth. Women and men arrested but never found, people murdered, corpses floating in the Mapocho River that runs through Santiago, on the coast of Valparaiso the near-dead bodies of people were thrown into the sea where they later drowned. All happening at the same time. Bodies. What *kind* of life for what *kind* of bodies? Life or death are not the only variables contained here, since the questioning of life forms involves a reflection on otherness and difference, the acknowledgement that intolerance, oppression of one body over another and principal cruelty were implicit in these executions. The question is linked to the bio-political problems that, as a way of critical analysis, allow us to question the ways of life and the forms of control and discipline that are installed at this time. In the early years of the dictatorship, Chilean society endured forms of discipline and control of life in its most explicit details, altering and formatting subjectivity by instrumentalizing fear and physical violence.

## A MUSEUM

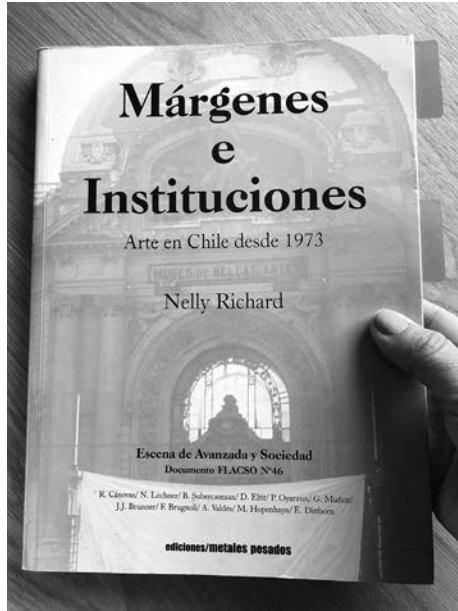
'*Margins and Institutions- Art in Chile since 1973*' is a book published in 1987, by cultural theorist Nelly Richard. The book is vital to understanding some of the aesthetic-political plots that occurred in parts of the Chilean cultural scene. It presents some of the artists and collectives who created their work after the 1973 military coup. The publication was co-edited between Chile and Australia thanks to the efforts of artist Juan Dávila, then living in Melbourne and writing for the magazine *Art and Text*, and Chilean publisher Francisco Zegers from Santiago. The artistic productions portrayed in Richard's book are related to a conceptualization which she named *Escena de Avanzada* (Advanced Scene). *La Avanzada* brings together artists linked to the repressive context of the dictatorship who used their work to create experimental languages for that time period and expressing these through photocopies, performance, artistic happenings, video art, etc.:

The military coup produced a "waste-land" in which the works by members of *La Avanzada* fought for their success, without relying on any supporting or protecting framework to shield the art from the general state of complete destruction and danger that surrounded it.<sup>4</sup>

For the author, this wasteland refers to the absence of an established field, like for example the future of art history, the Academy or the museum, from which one seeks to demarcate oneself, separating borders, creating other spaces. Richard argues that *La Avanzada* lost this field when it was destroyed with the arrival of the military dictatorship. The military coup produced a traumatic and devastating effect for artists because of "*the suppressions and mutilations in the utopian-revolutionary narrative*", Richard observes, thereby referring to the previous period where the context of the government under the *Unidad Popular* coalition generated other forms of aesthetic-political commitment. On this background, *La Avanzada* proposes the urgency in recovering from the sadness of the desolation and formulating, through art, an

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<sup>4</sup> Nelly Richard. "Presentación de la segunda edición". en: Nelly Richard *Márgenes e instituciones. Arte en Chile desde 1973* Santiago: Ediciones Metales Pesados, 2007, p.152.



Book cover: 'Margins and Institutions – Art in Chile since 1973'  
Edited by Nelly Richard

ethic of denunciation of the experienced reality. According to Richard, this implied the challenge of reconceptualizing art by disrupting the artistic-cultural codes of tradition: “*La Avanzada responded to the coup with a multiplicity of images, materials, techniques and meanings that explored different forms of critical resistance against totalitarian violence.*”<sup>5</sup>

The “margins and institutions” in the book's title refers to “*the micropolitics of the spaces faced by the practices of critical resistance in those years. Resistance to the slabs of violence, censorship and power, that these practices were trying to destabilize from the borders of the anti-dictatorial field.*”<sup>6</sup> Today, these margins are part of the artistic canon from that period (for example, it has been integrated into Latin American conceptualisms). This is reflected among others in the way

<sup>5</sup> Op. Cit. p. 159.

<sup>6</sup> Op. Cit. p.11.

they have contributed to the academic and museographic legitimation, exemplified the production of books, catalogues and exhibitions in museums in different countries as well as in their presence at biennials or international art events. The cover of the book shows the image from *Inversión de escena* (Inversion of scene) by CADA (*Colectivo de Acciones de Arte* – Art Action Collective), in which various artists and activists collaborated:

On October 17, 1979 CADA performed *Inversión de escena* which consisted of sealing the entrance to the National Museum of Fine Arts with a white cloth. Simultaneously, eight dairy trucks that had been parading through the streets of Santiago were parked in front of the museum. In one of the parked trucks, a monitor showed images recorded during the parade.<sup>7</sup>

This way of questioning the museum as an institution interrupted by the dictatorship, as were many other institutions, reflects the anti-dictatorial gesture as an urgent form of resistance. The action was chosen for the book cover because, to some extent, it exemplifies the disruptive gesture in the museum acting as a legitimizing institution. It should be noted that CADA's actions were not carried out by its founding members alone; many other people participated, thereby demonstrating the capacity for intercollective agency contained in these actions.<sup>8</sup> As a symbol of power interrupted by the dictatorial regime, the National Museum of Fine Arts was to be the subject for further actions involving different records of how the memories affected us in relation to the bodies that were exhibited as victims of the regime.

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<sup>7</sup> Fernanda Carvajal, Paulina E. Varas y Jaime Vindel *Archivo CADA. Astucia práctica y potencias de lo común*, Santiago: Ocho libros editores, 2019, p. 321.

<sup>8</sup> Para más detalle sobre esto ver: Paulina Varas “Un espacio inventado desde una micropolítica del CADA” en: Fernanda Carvajal, Paulina E. Varas y Jaime Vindel *Archivo CADA. Astucia práctica y potencias de lo común*, Santiago: Ocho libros editores, 2019.



Poster: 'Proposition 335'

## A WOMAN

In May 1980, the National Museum of Fine Arts in Santiago hosted the Centennial Print Competition. On this occasion, a group of artists conformed by Luz Donoso, Elías Adasme, Sybil Brintrup and Hernán Parada presented *Proposición 335* (*Proposition 335*). It was registered as a “graphic work”, but in reality, it was a concealed act of multiplication. Five hundred copies were distributed; prints that became posters as the demand for distribution increased. The text on the posters demonstrated their transitivity in diverse environments such as the Museum of Fine Arts, a public road, the national press and other places. As opposed to the seriality of existence implanted in the dictatorship as a control society, multiplicity in this case is manifested by appearing in various places as a way of reaffirming life. The graphic work itself consists of the image of a woman taken from the book

¿*Dónde están?* (Where are they?)<sup>9</sup>, and shows the face of Lila Valdenegro, a woman from Valparaiso who was arrested and later disappeared while the military was searching for her husband, who was a member of the Communist Party. In her journal, Luz Donoso notes that the choice of the photograph for the book cover was not premeditated. Rather, she “stumbled” across this image in the book and was moved by the woman's story and by her expression, that seemed to speak volumes about those years of disappearances. It is not necessarily about Lila specifically. For Luz Donoso, it is a fact without narrowly defined explanations; rather they are possibilities of an elaboration of senses. I suppose that working with the photographic image must have constituted a double risk of, on one hand, facing the repressive organisms, but on the other hand, the private dimension of pain and the search for missing and possibly assassinated persons. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben proposes the idea of naked life and, from that notion, also the life of *Homo sacer*, who he describes as

“[...] one who, banned from society, can be killed without the commitment of homicide, but is not eligible for ritual sacrifice: a life destined for death in total impunity, the object of the relation of exception. In the face of the sovereign, there are no subjects of law, as modern juridical culture claims, but naked or sacred life, which can be assassinated.”<sup>10</sup>

This existential condition is further maintained in the sense that the work reflects on the poster's file number: “335”. This serial number belongs to Lila on the long list of disappearances which relatives and human rights organizations managed to put together little by little with the help of photographs of people whose whereabouts remained undetermined.

*Proposición 335* is based on the fact that reproducing and disseminating information on art through media such as film, TV, newspapers, etc. allows for, as indicated in the text accompanying the graphic

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<sup>9</sup> Volume 6, printed in graphic workshops Corporación Limitada in Santiago in 1979.

<sup>10</sup> Laura Bazzicalupo. *Biopolítica. Un mapa conceptual*. Editorial Melusina, Madrid, 2010, p. 124.

work: “1. *questioning the privileged status of an artwork displayed in a museum or an exhibition space*; 2. *altering the systems of trade and dissemination of art.*” In this sense it is understood that *Proposición 335* is linked to a previous action, where Lila's face was blown up on the facade of a commercial store in Santiago; “3. *provoke a critical attitude towards artistic expression*”, that is, towards traditional art techniques and their modes of production, and “*generate a mental rather than visual connection*” between the spectator and the work. This was not just an artistic problem but required that the spectators — who in any case would not necessarily be limited to an art public since the image circulated in the street — maintain a critical attitude towards the message. That is, questioning the living conditions of certain people and showing unidentified faces in the streets of Santiago during the dictatorship undoubtedly referred to the missing bodies; those that were not yet identified, those that were missing. And finally, “4. *not to allude to the social, but to interfere in the social arena.*” This is a critique of the illustrative character that some works had at that juncture; it is a call to action insofar as to intervene in the first place is to commit oneself socially, as the afflicted collective body cuts into the subjectivity. A city under siege, under curfew, is in itself a social and individual body that is altered, fragmented and violated. The urgency of the action is undoubtedly one of the most powerful statements of this graphic proposal, because, as it says in the byline, “*this work must be considered, in the last instance, an attempt to break with the socio-cultural determinations that make art work today an activity estranged from life.*” This condition as an activist manifesto, defending life through art, was reflected in other artistic proposals like some developed by CADA. I am referring specifically to the bio-political variable where the collective reflects through some actions on the living conditions under the dictatorship relating to *Proposición 335*, for example, in the last work by CADA, titled *Viuda* (Widow), from five years later, 1985. For this work, a photograph of the wife of a disappeared detainee is inserted on a newspaper page with an accompanying poetic text. Images of women and the forms of violence that they experienced could be portrayed in two ways. On the one hand, the widow, in a state of mourning loss,

and, on the other hand, the woman who finds herself in this undetermined state caused by the disappearance. Although *Proposición 335* is mainly embedded in the public space, it questions the very place where public life would take place, and turns this work into an insistence on appearance. The simplicity of the graphic work itself (a photocopy of an original composed by cutouts of the image and letters), contrasts with its powerful content.

The political dimension of art, present in this work, also appears in other Latin American artistic proposals from the 1970s and 1980s, with politically powerful practices and where formal issues may seem less relevant. But, as Suely Rolnik writes, one thing is not opposed to the other; rather, some artistic practices insist on formal rigor and their reflection is essential and subtle. “[...] *forms are not powerful and seductive in their own right, or autonomous from the process that gives birth to them; form here is inseparable from its role as an actualization of the sensations and tensions that force the artist to think-create.*”<sup>11</sup>

This rigor, explains Rolnik, is aesthetic but inseparably ethical; it turns responses in the body to affections from the outside world into something sensible. Further, it obtains an ethical component as it implies fulfilling the demands of life to remain in process. This signifies a strong seductive power, which enables it to effectively influence the places where it circulates. Rolnik proposes that certain works of art possess a healing quality (understood from the clinical perspective), and that some artworks can intervene in the process of subjectivation of those who approach them. For Rolnik, activating sensations implies the ability to relate to the world, and in that sense, to the ways in which some artists create language, activate other forms of perception and invention of worlds.

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<sup>11</sup> Suely Rolnik. Archive Mania. *44th AICA Congress*, Asunción, Paraguay, 2011. Published online in: <https://www.aica-paraguay.com>



## A NOMADIC INSTITUTION

In her book *An Archive of Feelings*,<sup>12</sup> Ann Cvetkovich recounts how narratives and archives, along with the public and private dimensions implicit in them, need to be refocused in order to address stories and memories that have been expelled from social life. She does so from a perspective of the queer culture of trauma and the wide range of feelings involved.

Through present movements in the popular insurrections since October 2019, we are also confronted with the significant social trauma caused by the military coup. Publicizing those feelings and sensations that affect us involves movements which, in their radicalism, as Cvetkovich points out, also affect the shared present:

“[...] how affect, including the affects associated with trauma, serves as the foundation for the formation of public cultures. This argument entails a reconsideration of conventional distinctions between political and emotional life as well as between political and therapeutic cultures.”<sup>13</sup>

The author's proposal does not challenge the extension of the category of the therapeutic beyond the limited and medicalized confinements between a clinical professional and a client, but rather proposes that emotional life can be seen as something that also affects public life.

From the thoughts of Deleuze and Guattari, a notion has emerged of the nomad as a potential that allows a bifurcation. How then, in this day and age, can we imagine a nomadic institution that involves the insurrectionary bodies that defend life and demand dignity? Is it possible to examine social trauma and turn it into a public culture, available for the future? An institution that challenges normality and confronts the normopathy<sup>14</sup> that encapsulates the remains of history in order to

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<sup>12</sup> Ann Cvetkovich *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p.271.

<sup>14</sup> (He) Who can be/live among the mad is necessarily 'progressive', insofar as he has broken the traditional contract of submission to what is called normality;

deliver them dosed with unbearable sterility. The public cultures that emerge from our experiences and affects and are linked to social traumas may offer an alternative to this construction of a repressive social culture with our bodies.

Otherwise, a proposal connected to our frailty and the social traumas we have experienced, makes it possible for public cultures to be affected by what we are living today and vice versa. A progressive porosity that implied those new forms of a life worth living beyond a mere phrase, an act of doing and of thinking in this world.

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that is, the amount of rules that make us – as Oury used to say – normopathic”. From Marie Depussé “Presentation. Félix Guattari: From Leros to La Borde” in: Guattari, Félix De Leros a La Borde. Analytical practices and social practices, Casus-Belli editions, Madrid, 2013.

*Kavita Singh*

## A Public Failure? Museums and Audiences in India

Throughout their entire career in the subcontinent, museums have been framed within a discourse of failure. At times, it is the authorities that are accused of failing museums by not offering them adequate support; at other times it is the museums that are denounced for failing to function well. At yet other times, the accusations of failure accumulate around a third party: the visitors to the museum, who constitute the public and whom the museum is supposed to address. In this context, we frequently hear the criticism that museums have failed to serve their public. But can the public too fail the museum? What is the role of the public in a museum, and how can they “fail” at performing this role? What kinds of “failure” discourses have been attached to the connection between Indian museums and their publics, and what can we learn from them? This brief essay is a preliminary attempt to outline some of the complex issues surrounding these questions.

The International Committee on Museums – the United Nations’ nodal organization for museums – has long defined museums thus:

*A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.*

It is worth noting the number of times a viewing public is invoked in this definition of the museum. The museum is in service of society; it is *open to the public*; it must *communicate and exhibit* (to viewers), for their *education, study and enjoyment*. The artefacts in its collection, the scholarship of its curators, the grandeur of the museum’s edifices, are all only one side of the coin. The museum’s audience constitutes

the other, essential side. All of the museum's riches are meaningless without the public in whose name things are collected, preserved and displayed, for whom the great buildings are built, and for whom its exhibits are laid out. The centrality of public presence and the obligation towards public service is the idea that mark the difference between the museum and its sister institution of the archive. For although both institutions are committed to collecting items of importance and preserving them for the *longue duree*, and both position themselves as centres of research and knowledge-production, the archive unabashedly is a space for specialists while the museum, however arcane its contents may be, is meant to be a space for public display. When an archive restricts entry to preserve its contents it is considered acceptable practice; if entry to a museum is barred, it is likely to provoke angry protestations. This suggests that while the archive is "about" the things that are in it, the museum is not as much about its *things* as it is about the *people* who come to see the things. Archives are embedded in a discourse about institutional obligations to the preservation of its collections while museums are embedded in a discourse of people's rights of access to its collections.

Scholars who try to trace the history of museums often trace its pre-history to the treasure-houses of churches, temples and palaces. These accounts speak of the treasuries of monarchs, which piled up precious objects of pecuniary and artistic value; the crypts of temples and churches that were filled with all sorts of valuable offerings; the curiosity cabinets of merchants that were stocked with wondrous things from near and far. But all of these were privately held, and so while they certainly form part of the history of collecting they cannot properly be placed in the history of museums. Museums as we know them came into existence on the 10th of August, 1793 when the Revolutionary government of France threw open the gates of a French royal palace to the public. Without actually transferring ownership of the treasures within it or affecting the economic status of any of those who passed through the portals of the Louvre, this dramatic gesture managed to effect a symbolic redistribution of the treasures of the monarchy by "giving" them to the people. It was a profoundly democratic act that

signaled the transformation not just of a building, and the royal treasures in it, but also of the people who were entitled to see and enjoy them. The opening of the gates of the Louvre performatively enacted the transformation of a subject population into a citizenry: people who had privileges and towards whom the state had an obligation as their birthright. In the subsequent wave of museum-making that followed, many European palaces voluntarily opened their doors to the people, as though to pre-empt a more violent takeover. Through this and a number of other concessions European monarchies offered their subjects partial sense of citizenship. Many of the fictions that serve as the underlying ideology of the museum to this day can be traced back to this moment and this fiction. These include the idea that museums “hold their collections in trust” for the people; now reframed as “heritage” the museum’s treasures are declared to “belong” to the people, deflecting the question of ownership; now precious objects should be valued not for their monetary worth but their “transcendent cultural value,” an abstract and numinous quality.

Since museums are made, held and maintained in the name of the people, museums are inextricably tied to publics – and to ideas of and about publics. As this idea took hold, a public that was increasingly self-conscious about its rights began to demand entry to hitherto inaccessible collections, insisting it wanted to see the collections of seeds, fossils and lumps of minerals that had been part of many scholarly collections. Under public pressure, scholarly collections like the British Museum (which at the start was primarily a natural history collection) were forced to open their doors to ordinary people. At the same time, an increasing number of state authorities saw how they could use museums to their advantage: they sought to make museums and draw publics to them so that they could be educated in ways that were useful to the state. In Britain for instance museums became an important part of the apparatus of Victorian social engineering, and to their working-class audiences they were expected to deliver lessons on industriousness, discipline, good taste and hygiene. In either formulation – entry demanded by right or firmly encouraged by the state-museums

and publics were intertwined. Inevitably, when museums arrived in India, the question of publics would arrive with it.

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In India the museum derives from a colonial knowledge-gathering project. From the late 18th century, as colonial officers surveyed their new territories, the information they gathered often took physical form: as botanical and geological specimens, as slabs of inscribed stones, as piles of manuscripts, as the dress, ornaments skulls and body-casts of different ethnic types. Believing that this motley collection would one day assemble an *Encyclopedia Indica*, servants of the East India Company persuaded their employer to establish a museum to house and care for these objects. The India Museum, the first museum that took India as its subject, was located in London in the East India Company's headquarters, where a London public came to gaze upon these specimens interspersed with the arms, jewels and other treasures that formed the Company's growing collection of loot seized in military victories in India.

Even as some colonial officers sent the objects that they gathered to London, others formed scholarly associations within India, whose premises too began to fill up with items collected in the course of their research. The Asiatic Society was founded in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1784; the Madras Literary Society was founded in Madras (now Chennai) in 1812; and an amateur scholars' group came up in Bombay (now Mumbai) in the 1840s. While the objects and artefacts they gathered were similar in scope to the collection exhibited in London, in India these collections remained the preserve of small circles of scholars. This was not by design. In fact, many of these societies had appealed to the Company to fund an institution that would take over their collections which had grown too large for them to maintain, but the East India Company was uninterested in forming public museums in India, and the requests of these societies fell upon deaf ears.

It was only in the aftermath of the Great Uprising of 1857, after the Crown took power from the East India Company, that the situation

began to change. Eager to placate the Indian public by signaling its difference from Company rule, the Raj embarked upon conspicuous reforms that would mark it off as a more benevolent authority. Along with many other policies and reforms designed to exhibit pastoral care, this phase of British rule also fostered the formation of museums. A surge of museum-building swept across Indian territories in the second half of the 19th century. The scholarly collections started by amateurs in the late 18th and early 19th centuries finally gained government support and were housed in majestic new buildings in the principal cities of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. Dozens of new museums were established in the other cities and lesser towns of British India.

As soon as the museums were opened to the public, Indian audiences entered them, and they did so in prodigious numbers. In 1895 the Keeper of the Madras Museum Edgar Thurston noted that 36,500 visitors had come to his museum on a single day.<sup>1</sup> Nineteen years later in 1914, the Jaipur-based surgeon and crafts revivalist T. H. Hendley reported that the Madras Museum had over 400,000 visitors the previous year while the Imperial Museum, Calcutta, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in Bombay had more than *twice* that number. At the time, these were the largest museum attendance figures in the world, surpassing the figures even for the British Museum in the same year.<sup>2</sup>

What allure could the museum hold for this vast Indian audience that flocked to it? Did it allow them a glimpse of fabulous treasures? Was it arranged to delight and instruct them, to bring them the wonders found in faraway lands? Oddly, it did none of these things. The new museums established by the government were not built for ‘the gratification of occidental curiosity, or the satisfaction of aesthetic longings,’ we are informed by policy documents of the time. Instead, they were made to support ‘... a development of a trade in (Indian) products.’<sup>3</sup> Museums

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<sup>1</sup> Government of Madras, Department of Education, “Administration Report of the Government Central Museum for the Year 1895-96.”

<sup>2</sup> T.H. Hendley, ‘Indian Museums,’ *Journal of Indian Art and Industry*, no. 125, 1914: p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> Secretary to the Home Department, ‘Note on Arrangements for Exhibi-

set up in the first fifty years of the Raj era were primarily Economic or Industrial museums which were to collect information about any item or process in India that had a potential economic use. Minerals and metals which could be mined; soil, different types of which could support different crops; timbers, useful for furniture or construction; flowers whose essences yielded perfume or medicine; insects, which produced silk or honey or wax or dye... nothing was without economic possibilities. The museum would display a sample of each resource, along with maps showing their occurrence and charts describing techniques for their extraction. The prodigious craft skills available in India were no less a resource to exploit than minerals or fertile soil. To this end, local officials were urged to collect samples and document the natural and human resources in their regions which they were to send to museums in nearby towns.

At the time that these museums were being founded in Victorian India, they were proliferating in Victorian Britain as well. However, the range and purpose of museums in Britain was much broader than in India. Many economic and industrial museums were set up to help British manufacturers improve their products. At the same time, collections of fine art were opened to the public. These, it was thought, would ennoble the minds and souls of the working-class that had swelled centres of industry: social reformers believed that, given the opportunity, the working class would soon eschew the drinking houses in favour of 'the rapt contemplation of a Raphael.'<sup>4</sup> Curiously, while the museums built by the Raj in India in the 19th century were primarily economic museums, colonial museum-makers in India spoke of them *as though they were art museums*. Indian audiences were expected to be in some way exalted by their visit to these museums full of timber samples and

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tions', the National Archives of India, File 1882: *Home Department Public Branch A July 188 no 157: Subject: Distribution of Business between the Home and Revenue Departments*.

<sup>4</sup> A 19th century authority cited in Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, Routledge, London 1995: p. 32.



lumps of rock, just as British audiences were expected to be ennobled through their exposure to Rubens and Raphael.

The public that entered the museum was clearly not addressed by it, and they found their own ways of taking pleasure in the institution. By the accounts of colonial museum keepers in India, huge crowds of visitors swarmed all over the museum, rushing past carefully arranged galleries full of taxonomically-arranged botanical samples and taxidermied animals only to stop and shriek out the names of what was already familiar to them – clay models of everyday fruit, or stuffed figures of common animals and birds -- completely missing the didactic lessons laid out in the museum. “For the great mass of visitors to the museums in India, who come under the heading of sight-seers, and who regard museums as *tamasha* houses, it matters but little what exhibits are displayed,” complained Thurston.<sup>5</sup> J.Ph. Vogel, Keeper of the Mathura Museum, grumbled about the “constant flow of a noisy crowd” through Indian museums. Along with several other commentators, Vogel noted that the popularity of the museum among poorer, lower-caste Indians marked this as a space for their use, keeping the better class of native away from the museum. “The popularity of our museums with the lower classes has resulted in making them unpopular with the higher,” he complained. “Does one ever hear of an Indian chief or leading man giving a donation to a museum or giving some valuable object on loan? I am afraid the Indian aristocracy look on the museum as something pleasing to the vulgar with which they are not concerned.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, although the Keepers in Indian museums might take pride in the quantity of visitors their institutions attracted, they were dismayed by the quality.

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<sup>5</sup> Government of Madras, Department of Education, “Administration Report of the Government Central Museum for the Year 1895-96.”

<sup>6</sup> Dr. J. Ph. Vogel of in *Conference of Orientalists including Museums and Archaeology Conference held in Simla July 1911*, Government of India, pp. 117-18. For a fine discussion of audiences at museums and scientific exhibitions in India, see Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India*, Princeton University Press, 1999: Ch. 2.

What Vogel observed in 1911 continues to mark Indian museums today. Museums, along with many other public goods (such as public transport, public schools and public parks) are primarily used by those who cannot afford more expensive private alternatives. Through this, the social presence of Indian museums differs markedly from the usage patterns observed for European museums by Bourdieu and Darbel.<sup>7</sup> In Europe, Bourdieu and Darbel have famously noted, museums were a tool of embourgeoisment, where working class or lower middle class visitors hoped to better themselves through the acquisition of culture and tastes associated with the elite. In India, something quite different seems to have happened: the crowds come, not to be disciplined by the museum but to enjoy it in carnivalesque fashion; they do not expect to be changed by the museum visit, but to have the liberty to enjoy themselves within it.

What allure did the museum hold for these vast subaltern audiences who were unable to read the museum's labels and were uninterested in the museum's lessons about economic resources? However pedantic the colonial museum's displays may have been, it placed them in an attractive setting. Built as part of a new colonial extension of the city, the museum was often at the centre of a grand civic space that included parks and boulevards. Sometimes the museum was part of a larger knowledge-complex that included botanical gardens and zoos. The museum buildings were appealing, and sometimes flamboyant, structures, with soaring facades and fine interiors. They had the appurtenances of modernity, including running water, toilets and electric or gas light. In the museum he had established at Jaipur, Hendley noted how 'the country people who thronged the museum, especially on holidays, ... were not only delighted with the exhibits but astonished at being allowed to wander at their will about the beautiful halls of the

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<sup>7</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Darbel, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public* (Eng. Trans.), Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1990. See also Tony Bennett, Ch. 7, 'Museums and Progress: Narrative, Ideology, Performance,' in *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995.

building.<sup>8</sup> Not only were they allowed to enter the museum, the institution was even hospitable to them. The displays might have remained inscrutable but entrance was kept free and open to all, and often in the parks outside were bandstands where musicians hired by the municipality would play. Many museums arranged for special zenana days, when women in purdah could visit a museum staffed entirely by female employees.

It is not generally recognized that these museums and parks were the first, and probably the only, set of attractive buildings and well-ordered public spaces in India that were accessible to all, regardless of their class, gender or caste. What an extraordinary innovation this was in India, the land of *homo hierarchus*, where access to 'public' space and facilities such as village commons, grazing lands and water sources had traditionally been highly regulated. It is salutary to remember that in India even that other grand building, the temple, was open only to select strata of Hindus: the Temple Entry Act, which gave the lowest castes the right to enter temples, was passed nearly a decade after Independence, in 1955. The coming of the public museum to India, then, offered the country's first hospitable urban space to the poor and marginalized. And by allowing entry to all into the museum by right, the museum well may be the place that offered the Indian public its first intimations of what it means to be a citizen rather than a subject. Even at this great remove from the convulsions of Revolutionary France or the slow and incremental growth of British republicanism, the museum still brought with it the whiff of democracy.

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In the heady years after Independence, the institution of the museum was seized eagerly by the government of the newly-minted Republic of India. It was seen as an arena for cultural representations, but for a culture whose contours were to be shaped to be of service to new narratives needed by India. These included tales of a great civilizational

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<sup>8</sup> Hendley, Op. Cit., p. 41.

past that could inspire patriotism and of a history whose plural strands could be used to demonstrate unity in diversity. As the internal map of India was drawn and re-drawn, the provinces and then the newly-formed linguistic states were given museums that celebrated their own sub-national cultural formations. Museums became an integral part of every state, for Prime Minister Nehru was convinced that museums and other visual displays would be able to “speak” to the vast illiterate population who could not be reached by the written word.<sup>9</sup>

In the new dispensation, the public was seen as the “problem” that the museum would somehow solve. But how? Essay after essay published in the *Journal of Indian Museums* in the 50s, 60s, 70s and even 80s imagine an infinitely malleable visitor. Typical of these is an essay on ‘Indian Museums and their Public’ written by the director of the Salar Jung Museum, M.L. Nigam. In it, the author observed that in the colonial period, “the history of India was divided into three distinct periods, viz., the Hindu period, the Muslim period and the Buddhist period with a view to make people, caste and creed conscious... to perpetuate colonial rule. With the changed political socio-economic outlook and environment of the Indian Republic, museum personnel are searching for new goals and objectives for museum research and education.”<sup>10</sup> As the state pressed the museum into its service, it had to reorient its messages to serve current national needs, but in this essay written in the 1980s, Nigam presents this as an unresolved problem. Museums can serve the state, but it was not clear to the museologists quite how they would do so.

Even while the state was investing in the expansion of the museum network in the country, financial stringencies meant that museums, particularly the newly-built ones, would lack the architectural flourishes and ancillary pleasures that had been available in the museums built in the

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<sup>9</sup> *Journal of Indian Museums*, Vols. 4-8. Museums Association of India, 1948: p. 120.

<sup>10</sup> M.L. Nigam, “Indian Museums and their Public,” *Journal of Indian Museums*, Vol. 39, 1983: pp 43-47” p. 46.

colonial period. Instead, in a convergence of post-War aesthetics and the requirements of economy, museums would be minimalistic in their design and display, their concrete boxes holding sparsely populated vitrines that lacked context and explanation.

As a result, despite the professed interest in addressing its public anew, the museums of Independent India became entangled in contradictory impulses that made the institution less appealing, less delightful and less popular than the museums of yore.

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Today, some of the grand institutions that had been founded in the colonial period remain the most highly-visited museums in India in preference to the drab buildings of the post-colonial period. Why do these large audiences still visit museums, even when there are so many other sources of visual pleasure available today? As with much of reception studies, understanding the inner responses of museum visitors is an unrealizable dream. But in her study of lower-class audiences in Mumbai's CSMVS museum the historian Savia Viegas offered some tantalizing glimpses.<sup>11</sup> In the arms and armour gallery, Viegas found that life-size casts meant to represent (Muslim) Mughal emperors wearing armour were believed by the Hindu Marathi visitors to be local (Hindu) kings Shivaji and Sambhaji, and family groups jostled to have their photographs taken next to 'their' heroes. The authoritative labels that clearly identified the armour as belonging to the Mughal emperor Akbar was simply not being read by the audiences who relied on, and relayed, an oral tradition that was already in circulation about an alternative meaning of these museum exhibits.

For other visitors from rural areas near Mumbai, Viegas found that the museum visit had a ritual significance. These visitors were Dalits, members of the lowest, 'untouchable' castes and followers of the great

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<sup>11</sup> Savia Viegas, 'Rich Men's Collections, A Nation's Heritage, and Poor Men's Perceptions: Visitors at the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India,' *Teaching South Asia*, Vol. 1, no. 1, 2001.

political leader Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) who had urged them to reject Hinduism and to embrace the more egalitarian faith of Buddhism instead. Every year, on Ambedkar's death anniversary, hundreds of thousands of Dalits travel from rural Maharashtra to Mumbai to pay respects at Dr. Ambedkar's cremation site. Many then carry on to the museum, where they view the ancient Buddhist sculptures as 'their' heritage. A Dalit visitor said that he felt a 'violent reaction' when he saw the Brahmanical exhibits that he associated with the Hindu communities who oppress them. When he saw how the Hindu sculptures were accommodated in grand galleries while Buddhist ones were relegated to the corridors, it made him "want to vomit."<sup>12</sup> As this viewer travelled through the museum he too had little interest in the art historical narrative that the museum was attempting to convey. Instead, much like the audiences that had irked Edgar Thurston so long ago in Madras, who had rushed past his elaborate taxonomical displays and who paused only in front of objects already familiar to them, this Dalit visitor visited the museum to see himself in it: he was not seeking new knowledge but rather confirmation of what he already knew. And now, here, in the floor plan of the museum, in the hierarchy of spaces allotted to Buddhist and Hindu sculptures, he was able to see a map of his own marginality.

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Many of the discourses of failure around Indian museums arise when these Indian museums are judged by an alien yardstick. This is not to contradict many of the complaints that have been made about Indian museums, which have indeed been unforgivably passive towards the role they could play in society, opaque about their functioning, and irresponsible towards the collections they are meant to safeguard. But if we judge Indian museums only by their inability to perform a function that museums elsewhere are able to accomplish, we will blind ourselves to what museums in India do actually do, or the social effects that their presence stimulates. Failures are of many types, and some failures succeed in being rather interesting ones indeed.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., n.5.

*Marcelo Rezende*

## The School and the Forest: a Museum

Translated by Zoë Perry

When applied to the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the mathematics of loss is altogether monumental: on September 2, 2018, more than 90% of its 20 million-item collection was destroyed after a fire broke out at Latin America's largest natural history museum, in what could be described as the greatest museological tragedy ever faced by Brazilian culture. Created in 1818 by King João VI, when Brazil was still a colony of Portugal, the National Museum had evolved over two centuries into the foremost setting for knowledge and disagreements over various chapters of geology, ethnography, and anthropology in Brazil, as well as becoming a critical space for archaeological research and insight into Brazil's prehistoric period.

The arithmetic of this disaster is compounded by irreparable loss: one of the world's most complete collections of dinosaur fossils, including the *Maxakalisaurus topai*, a herbivore measuring about 13 meters long and weighing nine tons; Andean and Egyptian mummies; the Francisca Keller library, with a collection of 537,000 books. And that is just the start of a doleful list. Over 40,000 anthropological items were burned, from more than 300 indigenous nations. The entire ethnology collection was lost in the fire. Among the approximately 700 items reduced to ash was the collection of African and Afro-Brazilian objects, including ritual masks, musical instruments, weapons, and the throne of African King Adandozan, of the ancient kingdom of Dahomey. The herbarium created in 1831 by German botanist Ludwig Riedel was lost in the devastation, with its 550,000 specimens from every biome of Brazil, representing the local natural splendor. And last but not least, Luzia, as the oldest human fossil ever found in the Americas was called. At some 11,000 years old, Luzia, was the earth's oldest "Brazilian woman".

There is a great deal more that might illustrate just how catastrophic this event was for science, for museology, and for the search for an identity as a culture and a nation. The mathematics of loss is virtually infinite. These are the material aspects, what is contained and can be described in this inventory of mourning. But what set of circumstances, what context could have led the National Museum to such an utterly fragile state?

If we think about the National Museum as a reflection of the place and role of museums in the shaping of Brazil as a nation, then it is interesting to note that the first (documented) crisis faced by the institution dates back to 1844, described by then director Frei Custódio Alves Serrão, who had already identified problems regarding the preservation of its collection: “The department of numismatics and liberal arts, archaeology, customs and traditions of ancient and modern nations is found in a room whose roof is in danger of collapse, given the large cracks in the plaster that continue to widen (...).” The solution? Transfer the objects to other rooms, “which will become so piled up, rendering any work in them impossible and the closure of the establishment inevitable until this failure is remedied.”<sup>1</sup>

Similar complaints were made 174 years later, just before the fire, when the National Museum found itself up against yet another critical moment with regard to the State governments, and private sector economic stakeholders. The idea of an institution dedicated to memory and research being “in danger of collapse” has been a constant in narratives about the museum, its activities, and development. In fact, this ongoing struggle against various forms of decay might even be the epitome of a sort of routine in the day-to-day of Brazilian museums. What is unique about what we observed at the National Museum is the fact that it made visible, in a drastic way, the strained and difficult relationships between history, power and society in Brazilian culture. The fact

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<sup>1</sup> Fernandes, Antonio Carlos Sequeira and Henriques, Deise Dias Rêgo: José da Costa Azevedo e Custódio Alves Serrão: da formação na Universidade de Coimbra à estruturação do Museu Nacional no Brasil. University of Coimbra Press. Lisbon, 2013.



that the fire happened within a context that was catastrophic in every sense serves almost as an illustration of Brazilian contradictions. As a far-right government took its first steps towards power, the only statement on the matter by the man who would go on to become Brazil's next president (Jair Bolsonaro) is telling: "It caught fire already. What do you want me to do?" he declared to the local press. A few months later, the Amazon rainforest would also catch fire, and his reaction was similar. His behavior during Brazil's Covid pandemic, in 2020, has been no different.

Even so, the counting of the unrecoverable items alone is incapable of describing the presence of the symbolic promise that the institution has projected onto Brazilian culture, something that made the National Museum, on many occasions, both a mirage and a metaphor for a particular turmoil originating from the nation's colonial experience, racial policies, fantasies, authoritarianism, violence and force. Just as in Frei Custódio Alves Serrão's report, which describes both historical fact and the 21st century present, the National Museum's contradictions lie precisely in that past which, at least in this case, we seem to have never moved beyond. A case in point: shortly after the fire, representatives from indigenous nations were heard on Brazil's largest TV network, Rede Globo, asking the cameras "why did they take these things from us? To let everything burn?" "They", of course, are "us", demonstrating how the Museum is simultaneously agent, victim, and consequence of the construction of the country and its imaginary. In this sense, the National Museum could be construed as the "museum of the Brazilian paradox", in what it projects as discourse about its own collection and memory.

So, if we acknowledge that the National Museum is responsible for a special interference in the construction of the Brazilian imaginary, then what might it symbolize as a potentiality that was never actually realized, beyond its material dimension? In other words, the narratives presented by the museum, which have become crystallized in inaccurate, normative thought on history, heritage, and identity. This is perhaps one of the most relevant questions regarding the institution's future.

What precisely would it mean to resurrect the National Museum after its tragedy? Picking up where it left off? In other words, would the purpose of rebuilding the National Museum be to return to the same museum model? Or might this be our chance not only to rebuild, but to reinvent its model, discourse, narratives, and actions out of a lost collection and a renewed process of contact and interaction with society? Using the National Museum as an example, a radical example, other questions are needed. Under whose ethnology would the Museum look to its past and present? Whose anthropology? How do we narrate facts and their projection onto history, the non-Western experience, starting from the absence of material things? What national identity would the museum put forward?

The drama of identity is a constant in nations that have disentangled themselves from their colonial status, and Brazil has been no different, where this identity building can be seen as an ongoing, neverending drama, because it is experienced through the reconciliation of opposites: western and non-western, mixed-race and racist, libertarian and authoritarian, gentle and violent, former colony with colonialist thought, baroque and modern, spiritual and materialist. These dilemmas are all apparent in the past century's theoretical construction, literature, art, and daily Brazilian life. A drama built in the shape of a giant labyrinth, and the National Museum, in its most varied forms, could be construed as one of the originating elements in the framework of this discomfiture.

Among those who have attempted to face the Minotaur in this labyrinth of identity, imagining a way out *from* the National Museum, was poet, activist and “enfant terrible” of the Brazilian avant-garde, Oswald de Andrade (1890-1954). Andrade – perhaps righteously, perhaps ironically – is a figure who has been debated around the globe since the late 1990s for his philosophy of anthropophagy. Following the 24th Bienal de São Paulo, organized by curator Paulo Herkenhoff in 1998, anthropophagy became of interest to the international art system. One of the reasons for this attention stems from the fact that this cannibalistic notion encapsulated the Brazilian condition, while simultaneously

expanding on it, turning anthropophagy into a tool for nations and cultures in a post-colonial context during the intense process of globalization. Andrade's appropriation of historical fact (cannibalism in Brazil, anthropophagy from certain indigenous cultures), in order to formulate a concept of identity, demonstrates Oswaldian anthropophagy in action and process.

Anthropophagy is a concept as complex as it is mysterious, but by borrowing a phrase from Oswald de Andrade himself, in his *Manifesto Antropófago* (“Anthropophagist Manifesto”, 1928), perhaps we can distill its spirit: “I am only concerned with what is not mine. Law of man. Law of the cannibal (...)/Without us, Europe wouldn't even have its meager declaration of the rights of man.”<sup>2</sup>

In a way, the manifesto aims to offer up a strategy for the relationship between Brazilian culture and the world. But, four years earlier, Oswald de Andrade had proposed a previous step: to create an agenda capable of solving Brazil's issues with itself, its history, paradoxes, and contradictions, publishing the *Manifesto da Poesia Pau-Brasil* (“Manifesto of Pau-Brasil Poetry”).

The National Museum is mentioned twice in Andrade's manifesto, which was published in 1924, the same year as the *Surrealist Manifesto*, by André Breton in Paris.<sup>3</sup> Adhering to the tone and energy of the manifestos produced during that period of historical avant-garde movements, the text is punchy and vibrant, constructed through images that simultaneously describe a state in the present, making reference to the

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<sup>2</sup> The original manifesto was first published in Portuguese in the *Revista de Antropofagia*, in São Paulo, in 1928. The translation used here is by Leslie Bary. *Cannibalist Manifesto*. *Latin American Literary Review*, Vol. 19, No. 38 (Jul. – Dec., 1991), pp. 35-37.

<sup>3</sup> The original manifesto was first published in Portuguese in the Rio de Janeiro newspaper *Correio da Manhã*, on March 18, 1924. The translation used here is by Stella M. de Sá Rego. *Manifesto of Pau-Brasil Poetry*. *Latin American Literary Review*, Vol. 14, No. 27, *Brazilian Literature* (Jan. – Jun., 1986), pp. 184-187.

past, while demanding transformative, destructive, *incendiary* action in the name of a renewed future. The museum, with an apparently enigmatic presence, manifests itself at two distinct moments:

We have a dual and actual base – the forest and the school. The credulous and dualistic race and geometry, algebra and chemistry soon after the baby-bottle and anise tea. A mixture of 'sleep little baby or the bogey-man will get you' and equations.

A vision to encompass the cylinders of mills, electric turbines, factories, questions of foreign exchange, without losing sight of the National Museum. Pau-Brasil.

Not losing sight of the National Museum, Oswald de Andrade sums up its situation in the manifesto's final lines:

Barbarous, credulous, picturesque and tender. Readers of newspapers. Pau-Brasil. The forest and the school. The National Museum. Cuisine, ore and dance. Vegetation. Pau-Brasil.

The school and the forest appear connected to the National Museum in these two appearances in the Manifesto da Poesia Pau-Brasil. Oswald de Andrade seeks an outline, and a symbology for his agenda in the name of solving a problem. But what agenda is possible for the National Museum? How could this agenda be a tool for use in the present, as Andrade had wanted, and an idea on behalf of the Museum's reinvention (instead of a reconstruction, an uncritical return to the same, former state)?

In an article published in 1972, literary critic Livia Ferreira proposed an analysis of Manifesto da Poesia Pau-Brasil as an agenda to be implemented in order to establish a new way of acting in and for Brazilian culture. In Oswald de Andrade's writing, the movement lies in taking values that are at odds, while rejecting hierarchies of knowledge on what could constitute a debate on national identity.

In Livia Ferreira's view, according to the understanding put forward by the manifesto, there would be proceedings on behalf of a formal, visual and intellectual liberation from an almost *natural disorder* in the formative elements in the nation's experience. From the outset,

the manifesto, as explained by Livia Ferreira, encourages a contextual examination:

Brazilian culture has a dual base.

This dual base subsists, simultaneously with the diversity of its elements, as a cultural totality.

Natural infrastructure (the forest) must exist together with the school (superstructure).

There is a simplicity in Brazilians (credulous race) concomitantly with the capacity for mental elaboration (geometry.)

High science is taught, soon after childhood.

There is a legacy laden with prejudices that value the doctoral knowledge of house “scholars”, erudite knowledge from books that are almost mythologized by the cultural consensus.<sup>4</sup>

After this examination of the conditions given, Oswald de Andrade moves on to a programmatical perspective: how do we react to this context?

Experience the Brazilian culture of the moment.

Use the precise amount of science necessary for the present Brazilian conditions.

Deeply assimilate all external cultural elements, once accepted.

Develop a sense of practicality in the adaptation process, without being dazzled by superficial and mass movements.

Take into account the value of experimentation, which allows one to obtain proof of the validity of the attempts.

Break free from metaphysics, if necessary. There is an entire possibility of not thinking, within philosophy, art, politics, according to Greek principles, a legacy of Western civilization. The condition of belonging to a peculiar culture, which, in addition to its Greco-Latin legacy possesses a potential, native wealth, liberates the Brazilian to open up.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, nothing could actually be structurally transformative if it ignored “the psychological mysticism” of Brazilian culture and people; nothing could be relevant if the desire and impulse to “participate, be present

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<sup>4</sup> Ferreira, Livia: *Manifesto da Poesia Pau-Brasil*. Análise quanto a significação. *Revista de Letras* Vol. 14 (1972), pp. 153-175. São Paulo: Universidade Estadual Paulista Julio de Mesquita Filho.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

in the world” were denied. From an Oswaldian perspective, the choice between the Forest (indigenous heritage) and the School (rationalization from the West) would always be a red herring. Mysticism would be the model and means for a post-colonial cultural identity. This would be in service to Brazil, but it would also be of interest to the world, remade without internal or external cultural hierarchies. Tradition, therefore, is not denied, but understood as a step to be observed, researched, “but not imitated in its retrogressive values (the National Museum)”. Livia Ferreira sums up this specific cultural context as follows: “It is exactly this typical duality in Brazilian culture that the author defends, by ending on the different and concomitant elements that operate in Brazil. The view informed by technique should ally itself with an awareness of the typically-Brazilian cultural heritage of the past: the National Museum.”<sup>6</sup>

It's possible to see how Oswald de Andrade turns the National Museum into a scenario of failure and victory in the temporal relationships between the forest and the school: the past becomes an element of doom, something restrictive, if it is unable to live alongside current cultural practices, which bring renewed contradictions of all kinds. In overcoming its own limits, the Museum would exist permanently in a contemporary light, going beyond fixed temporal measures (an idea that would be revisited between the 1950s and 1970s during the period of radical Brazilian museology proposed by Lina Bo Bardi and Walter Zanini), rebuilding its relationships with society, with the public (“Barbarians, credulous, picturesque and sweet”), with its collection, and the founding chapters of its own history.

In the National Museum's extreme example, which both forms and results from the structuring elements of a possible identity, what disappeared in the fire would be brought back, no longer as the trauma of lost material items, but transformed into a point of thrust so that, effectively, the institution is able to realize its full potential in the present, based on a new ethnology, anthropology, and public mission. As

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Oswald de Andrade writes in his manifesto Pau-Brasil, “as the age is miraculous, laws were born from the dynamic rotation of destructive factors.”

Synthesis

Equilibrium

Automotive finish

Invention

Surprise

A new perspective

A new scale

Whatever natural force in this direction will be good.

Pau-Brasil poetry.





### III



*Andreas Beutin*

## Is the Museum of the Future Green?

Institutional Challenges of a Changing Ecological  
Consciousness in Art and Culture

Translated by Judith Rosenthal

Art and culture are key factors in cities and towns – whether metropolises with populations in the millions, medium-sized cities or rural towns. Art and culture offer a basis for the creative, but also the critical (re)appraisal of society's history and future, its driving forces and its causes for concern. Just as the interplay between many widely differing voices and opinions is part and parcel of a functioning democracy, culture – and particularly the visual arts – functions as a kind of calibration instrument. Art delivers commentary, sometimes of a critical nature, as a way of accompanying societal coexistence in an aesthetic, creative manner. Art has the potential to promote the most diverse utopias. The concept of the connection of art and life has existed since Romanticism, for instance, Art Nouveau, the Bauhaus and the many participative art currents since the 1960s in Europe and America. What these movements had and have in common is the underlying aim to enrich and thus to improve life with the aid of artistic values and ideas, and to call for active participation in societal processes. Alongside many other cultural institutions, museums are prime venues of artistic-critical inquiry: from historical museums to the many institutions of contemporary art or for example the recently opened Futurium in Berlin – an institution devoted to the negotiation of issues about coexistence in future societies. Vibrant cultural life makes a megacity just as attractive and worth living in as a small town. Over the past decades, hardly any branch of culture has experienced as phenomenal an increase in interest and attention as the visual arts, especially contemporary art. In museums all over the world, the visitor numbers continue to increase; in many places, new museums are being built or the facilities of the existing ones

expanded. In 2019, some 112 million museum visits were recorded in Germany alone – an unbelievable success factor! That, however, is just one side of culture.

If we consider the global ecological situation, we cannot help but confront the fact that, especially over the past few decades, massive changes have come about. Scientists worldwide acknowledge that the Anthropocene age is tantamount to a new geochronological epoch because, above all in the areas of biology, geology and the atmosphere, mankind is responsible for irreversible changes. Species extinction, environmental pollution and global warming are just a few of the consequences. There is disagreement, however, over where to date the beginning of this new geological era. Jan Zalasiewicz and other scientists, for example, regard 16 July 1945 – the day of the first atomic bomb test – as the start of the era determined by human beings and their actions.<sup>1</sup> This date also makes sense in view of the period that followed directly on the heels of World War II: a period marked by an exponential increase in the world population, the intensive advancement of industrialization and, with it, massive global economic growth. These phenomena went hand in hand with the rapidly rising consumption of primary energy, which recorded more than a fivefold increase between 1950 and 2010.<sup>2</sup> The above-sketched developments are sufficiently well known: mankind's excessive overuse of natural resources at its disposal, accompanied by severe pollution of the air, the land and the oceans. Regardless of where we date the beginning of the Anthropocene, however, it is

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Zalasiewicz et al., “When did the Anthropocene begin? A Mid-Twentieth Century Boundary Level is Stratigraphically Optimal”, in: *Quaternary International Volume*, 383, 5 October 2015, pp. 196–203, here p. 200. However, there are also opinions associating the Anthropocene with the beginning of industrialization around 1800.

<sup>2</sup> See Will Steffen et al., “The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration”, in: *Anthropocene Review*, 2 (1), pp. 81–98, here p. 84; quoted and illustrated in: Jochem Zwier and Vincent Blok, “Energetic Ethics: Georges Bataille in the Anthropocene”, in: Luca Valera and Juan Carlos Castilla (eds.), *Global Changes: Ethics, Politics and Environment in the Contemporary Technological World*, Cham 2020, pp. 171–180, here pp. 172f.

presumably beyond dispute that climate change represents one of the most major challenges we face, and one of those with the most impact globally.

On the one hand, never before has there been as much worldwide discussion of climate protection as there was in 2019; on the other hand, never before has so much carbon dioxide been emitted or have people flown as much (and as cheaply), to mention just two aspects of our global lack of consistency – if not to say schizophrenia. Through the far-reaching cessation of air travel and tourism as well as the decrease in production processes, the current coronavirus pandemic has brought about a temporary decline in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Nevertheless, it is to be feared that, after the crisis is overcome, the world's industrial nations will attach (even) less importance to ecological restrictions than before in the effort to make up for the damages and losses in sales as quickly as possible.

But let us return to culture. Even within this important area of society there is, in addition to many successes and widespread appreciation, another side of the coin. Despite all the evidence regarding the enormous significance of cultural institutions for coexistence in society, museums particularly tend to have “difficult” records when it comes to their carbon footprints. The annual power consumption of even just a medium-sized museum would suffice to supply several hundred Western European private households for a year. The energy consumption of the world's large museums such as the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the New York MoMA or the Tate Modern in London is presumably many times higher. What is more, wattage is only part of what goes into the carbon footprint calculation; there is also energy consumption for heating and the lighting of the objects and visitor areas, extensive expenditure for the transport of artworks – which in many cases are brought in from all over the world for temporary exhibitions – travel by curators for meetings, loan negotiations and openings, etc.

“Naturally, the world of culture is quite decidedly in favour of climate protection – and it produces greenhouse gases in vast quantities”, commented Hanno Rauterberg in an article in the 2 August 2019 issue of

the German weekly *DIE ZEIT* in which he criticized the sanctimony of the art world. And he continued: “The world of culture as a whole, but above all the art world, produces an ecological footprint so exorbitant as to be matched only by its craving for admiration. It is considered par for the course for curators to jet halfway around the world for a brief visit to an artist’s studio, for artworks to be transported by air express and, during art fairs in places like Miami and Basel, for the airports to be congested because so many collectors arrive by way of Learjet.”<sup>3</sup> However pointed this description, it must be conceded that Rautenberg is not entirely wrong: over the past decades, directors and curators seemed to have engaged in an unspoken contest for who attended the most fairs, biennials and festivals, and the further away and more off-beat the event, the cooler. And who has not seen the huge yachts – actually more like small cruise ships – of the international mega-collectors that dock at the Giardini in Venice every two years for the Biennale, demonstrating their power in the form of horsepower?

Naturally, we all need research and input, and despite the many media vehicles such as e-mail, Skype and VR, often have to look at the artworks in person, engage in intense discussion with artists about their intentions and the content of their art, negotiate partnerships with colleagues, be present at openings and network everywhere we go. For us, these activities are a matter of course, and, especially in view of the fact that art is, on the one hand, finally (!) becoming more global in the sense of the inclusion of artists who are not from the West, a much required change if we do not want to revert to featuring only the “old white men” of Europe and the U.S. in our museums and art galleries. On the other hand, this inevitably goes hand in hand with air travel from Europe to Asia, South America and even Australia, and thus contributing massively to global carbon dioxide emissions – to say nothing of the ecological impact of exhibitions, for which, in most cases, many hundreds of kilos, sometimes even tons of art have to be flown around the world. Here is an example: the transport of 500 kilo-

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.zeit.de/2019/32/greenwashing-klimaschutz-klimawandel-kunstszene-kulturwelt#comments> (accessed 28 May 2020).

grams of art from Shanghai to Hamburg by air means emissions of approximately 3.36 tons of CO<sub>2</sub>, by ship only 76 kilos, as a critical Norddeutscher Rundfunk (North German Broadcasting Corporation) TV report recently established – if with only very little sympathy for the concerns of art and museums and the problems presented to them by the climate dilemma.<sup>4</sup> Experience has taught us how quickly several tons of cargo accumulate even for a medium-sized exhibition of sculptures, large framed paintings and photographs or installations. Of course, to make museums “greener” the solution cannot be to dismiss transport entirely, because the viewers of the future should also have fascinating shows to go to, featuring more than just videos or art by local and regional artists.

To find solutions to this dilemma is undoubtedly one of the major challenges facing large museums if serious contributions are to be made, on an institutional level, towards the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and thus to the deceleration of climate change, particularly if the art world does not want to be thought of as a climate hypocrite. Good, foresighted time planning in cooperation with transport logistics providers, art insurers and lenders could enable the transport of more art by sea in the future, at least between continents, and thus reduce emissions substantially, even if it is impossible to avoid them entirely. What is needed is substantial rethinking as well as increased risk assessment on the part of the borrowers. On the whole, however, this is by all means a viable approach, as we know from the reports of several professional organizers of travelling exhibitions who transport their artworks by ship in specially equipped overseas containers.

But what about other ecologically problematic aspects of museum operations? Even though most museums are currently closed because of the pandemic, the temperature and humidity in exhibition and storage rooms have to be kept at certain levels to meet established international standards. These standards apply 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ndr.de/fernsehen/sendungen/kulturjournal/Die-Kunst-und-Klima-Museen-muessen-umdenken,kulturjournal7326.html> (accessed 28 May 2020).

ensure that the art and cultural assets are preserved as well as possible for posterity. And this accounts for a further dilemma. On 7 November 2019, under the heading “We need a ‘Green New Deal’ for museums”, a number of German museum directors signed an open letter to Monika Grütters, the German Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, in an action initiated and published by the art magazine *Monopol*. Among other things, the letter states that:

“Many of the art world’s protagonists are committed to environmental protection and measures against climate change. With its innovative powers, art can become a true resource in the struggle against environmental destruction. [...] On account of their ever-growing collections, which require constant air-conditioning, but also their day-to-day programmes, museums place certain demands on their buildings and their operation. Most exhibition institutions, however, are subject to public administrations and thus dependent on the climate-policy orientations of those entities. Integration in widely branching administration structures and broadly defined environmental policy master plans makes tailored solutions more difficult and slows decision-making processes. Museums are therefore not in a position to act with enough self-determination on environmental policy issues and to be able to set their own ambitious priorities. We therefore demand a central task force devoted exclusively to the climate policy challenges of museums and other public exhibition institutions [...]. Its purpose should be to advise museums, work with them to formulate concrete aims, and quickly draw up a catalogue of measures for a more sustainable public art world. [...] Art and culture have the potential to take society a step further by way of new ideas. We demand that culture be a pioneer with regard to climate protection as well.”<sup>5</sup>

This ambitious letter represents a first step towards taking action to improve the museum’s current functioning as an ecological problem zone – not only in Germany but also elsewhere. Until now, the ministry’s reaction has been noncommittal. Society needs art as a sparring partner and sometimes also as a disturbance, but also to learn from it and be inspired by its creative potential for new ways of thinking

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<sup>5</sup> The full text of the appeal is available at <https://www.monopol-magazin.de/offener-brief-klimaschutz-museum> (accessed 28 May 2020).



and new paths. On the one hand, there are international standards according to which cultural assets in general and works of visual art in particular have to be permanently preserved. On the other hand, ways and means must be found of working with museums to help them dig themselves out of their dilemma – with government aid if need be – and of supporting them on the road to more ecologically sustainable modes of operation. In cases of new museum constructions in the future, foresighted attention should – no, *must* – be paid to the sustainability of the materials used, and to the general environmental balance in museum operations, and lessons must be learned from the experiences of already existing museums.

The open letter to the federal commissioner was of course not the first initiative in this vein. Ten years ago, on 2 June 2010, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* ran an article by Stephanie Lahrtz entitled “Das grüne Museum” [The Green Museum].<sup>6</sup> The author explains that, “by means of innovative concepts in light mixing and room temperature”, it would be possible to save quite a lot of energy. In other words, these technical improvements are nothing new. Usually, however, they account for only a small part of the solution, because the main problem is still the high energy expenditures for the air-conditioning of artworks so as to preserve them in as unscathed and authentic a condition as possible for the generations to come. Improvements have been made in the ecological footprint of new museum buildings since the start of the new millennium, if not before. Nevertheless, the use of photovoltaic systems on the usually quite expansive rooftops of museums is more the exception than the rule. It would be a further sensible step on the part of the legislature to require the installation of solar collectors on all new buildings – not just museum buildings – as a matter of principle, to reduce the energy consumption peaks in the summer months, which, due to climate change, are becoming increasingly hotter. At the above-mentioned Futurium in Berlin, for example, a “large proportion of the building’s energy needs” are covered by this kind of rooftop sys-

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.nzz.ch/das\\_gruene\\_museum-1.5856670](https://www.nzz.ch/das_gruene_museum-1.5856670) (accessed 28 May 2020).

tem, and all rainwater is moreover collected in a cistern for use in cooling the building.<sup>7</sup>

It really is quite astonishing that culture, of all areas, should take so long to develop an ecological awareness of its own activities. After all, art itself was already bringing forth critical ecological stances as far back as the nineteenth century (with William Turner, John Constable, William Blake, William Morris and others). And this has been true more so in the past sixty years: represented by artists such as Hans Haacke, Robert Smithson, Alan Sonfist, Newton Harrison, Helen Meyer-Harrison, H.A. Schult and Jürgen Claus; these positions were initially isolated, but gained broad visibility in the various projects of Land Art. In 1972, Gyorgy Kepes – at the time a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and founder of that institute’s Center for Advanced Visual Studies – published the book *Arts of the Environment*, containing an essay entitled *Art and Ecological Consciousness*.<sup>8</sup> One of the most important artists of the twentieth century, Joseph Beuys, was among the founding members of the German Green Party, even if his habits of driving a Cadillac and wearing fur coats were as irreconcilable with ecological ideas as the present-day behaviour of the art world with respect to environmental consciousness. These are just a few of many examples from the past; institutionally speaking, however, they hardly had an impact in terms of a change in attitudes. In recent years, art has concerned itself far more than before with political issues in general, but institutions exhibiting art have often ignored criticism of their actions. In an article in *Monopol* of 5 August 2019, for example, Daniel Völzke comes to the conclusion that: “In museums, climate protection usually exists only as programme contents – if at all. Actually, however, there is plenty of action one could take to curb the emissions of exhibition buildings.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://futurium.de/de/ueber-uns/architektur> (accessed 28 May 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Gyorgy Kepes, “Art and Ecological Consciousness”, in: id. (ed.): *Arts of the Environment*, New York, 1972.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.monopol-magazin.de/gruenes-museum-hundertwasser-kunst-haus-wien?slide=0> (accessed 28 May 2020).

The most energetic step to date was taken by the directors of the Tate museums in the U.K. when, in July 2019, they declared a climate emergency and pledged to adopt measures to reduce their energy consumption as well as CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by at least 10% over the next four years: “We have reached a defining moment in the history of our planet and the cultural sector has a unique part to play in effecting change. This week Tate’s Directors are declaring a climate emergency. Our pledge is to respond with actions across all four Tate galleries, and at our stores, that put this centre stage.”<sup>10</sup> In the same statement, however, they also clearly identified the functional dilemma of museums: “There are, nevertheless, some hard truths to face about how we operate; about the sustainability of public institutions, like our museums, and about the future of culture. Large public buildings, attracting millions of visitors from the UK and overseas, require energy. We see caring for and sharing a national art collection as a public good, but it also consumes resources. We are rooted in the UK but international in outlook: making art accessible globally depends on the movement of works of art across the world.” They nevertheless resolved to step up to the challenges and strive to change attitudes and behaviours: “We will interrogate our systems, our values and our programmes, and look for ways to become more adaptive and responsible. [...] As an organization that works with living artists, we should respond to and amplify their concerns. And, as our audiences and communities across the world confront climate extinction, so we must shine a spotlight on this critical issue through art.”<sup>11</sup> All in all, the directors of the Tate museums regard this statement as the beginning of an effort to counter climate change in the area of culture. It will be interesting to see whether they reach the goals they have set themselves.

The statement by the Tate directors was evidently triggered by “Spotlight”, an environmental programme initiated a short time earlier by a government agency, the Arts Council London, to obligate thirty Brit-

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/tate-directors-declare-climate-emergency> (accessed 28 May 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

ish culture institutions to reduce their CO2 emissions. In other words, here the initiative came from ministerial quarters and not vice versa, as is currently the case in Germany. The process was set in motion by investigations that – in progress since 2012 – have shown that a small proportion of the institutions belonging to the Arts Council are responsible for more than half of its carbon dioxide footprint.<sup>12</sup> The Spotlight programme’s most important aims are: “Improvements to environmental literacy, strategy, and expertise, to agree achievable, yet ambitious, Environmental Impact Reduction Objectives (EIROs) and create governance frameworks that support their attainment and benefit the longer-term resilience of cultural institutions” and “supporting energy management strategies and operational systems to embed new technology and behaviours with a focus on driving down impacts and costs.”<sup>13</sup>

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) likewise began to address this problem several years ago. Within the framework of the triennial conference in Melbourne in 2014, the ICOM Committee of Conservation devoted itself specifically to topics about sustainability and the environment. Furthermore, quite independently of the ICOM, there has long been international discussion among conservators about how the presentation, storage and preservation of cultural assets in museums can be made more sustainable. Within this context, the established standards for the air-conditioning of storage and exhibition rooms has also been questioned,<sup>14</sup> an aspect that has met with certain resistance, however, on the part of many conservators.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/news/spotlight-carbon-emissions> (accessed 28 May 2020). Among the participating institutions are the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary; the National Theatre, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, the Royal Opera House, Serpentine Galleries and Whitechapel Gallery.

<sup>13</sup> <https://juliesbicycle.com/ace-spotlight/> (accessed 29 May 2020).

<sup>14</sup> One of the platforms that are active in this area and enjoy the respect of conservators worldwide is the ICOM-CC (see for example <http://www.icom-cc.org/332/-icom-cc-documents/declaration-on-environmental-guidelines/#.XrUAWRMzbMI>; accessed 28 May 2020). My thanks to Andrea Sar-

On the whole it can only be hoped that, all over the world, the museums and their backers –whether states or municipalities, foundations, business enterprises or private persons – recognize the necessity of supporting the facilities on their paths towards better sustainability and ecologically conscious strategies, so as to arm them for the global challenges of the twenty-first century. But above all in the case of new museum buildings, a shift towards the conscious and responsible economization of resources such as energy and water is imperative.

The exemplary initiatives described above should be taken as an incentive to support culture institutions in the process of bringing about a general shift of awareness with respect to ecological issues in the museum field on the functional and personal level. Within this context, states and cities should be encouraged not merely to provide the funds necessary for the respective measures, but also to assist the museums in an advisory capacity in finding individually suited ways and means, and to do whatever it takes to strengthen museums' resolve to become "greener" in the future. After all, it would be downright absurd if, of all public culture institutions, art institutions – whose purpose and claim it is to accompany societal processes critically with the art they present – should prove incapable of self-criticism and self-improvement. Initial measures for improving art museums' ecological footprint could be, among others:

- to optimize the transport of art (e.g. by sea instead of air)
- to reconsider the necessity of (air) travel, combined with increased use of alternative communication forms (e.g. Skype conferences)
- to convert all lighting to LED technology
- to review and optimize conservatorial measures for cultural assets
- to optimize the utilization of air-conditioned storage capacities

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torius, the conservator at the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, for pointing this out to me.

- to monitor and analyze building shells with regard to heating and cooling losses, followed by the optimization of existing building sections
- to install photovoltaic systems on unused roof surfaces as a means of reducing energy consumption
- to use electricity from renewable energy sources
- to reduce the one-time use of exhibition materials / to convert entirely to the multiple use of display materials (such as exhibition walls, carpets, pedestals, etc.)

This rudimentary catalogue of measures can naturally be no more than an initial spark for a change of paradigm and a transformation in the consumption of resources. Especially for state or municipal museums which hardly have enough funds of their own even just to keep the exhibitions running, the conversion and upgrading of operations poses a huge challenge. It is all the more important for states and cities to be prevailed upon to collaborate with culture institutions in tackling such measures. As we have known for a long time, culture not only contributes to the so-called soft location factors of a city, it is also a substantial economic factor because, depending on the quality of the offer, cities and communities can often take in many times their expenditures indirectly by way of the money visitors spend in the city through hotel accommodations, restaurant visits, shopping, etc. Statistics have shown that as much as 10 or even 15 times the expenditures can return indirectly, thus benefitting cities and putting the money invested back in the public purse. Against this background alone, it is more than advisable to support museums as effectively as possible on their way to becoming “green”, and thus to guarantee their futures on the ecological-economic level as well. This is the only way of ensuring that the museums of the future can make their contribution to climate protection.

*Romila Thapar*

## Seeking the Future Museum

In seeking to understand the future of the museum we should perhaps begin by observing its ancestry. If the museum is to educate the public or help mould a cultural identity for the same, it is necessary to explain how the museum as an institution came into being. What was its initial purpose and did it succeed in this? How did it expand this purpose by including other interests and did these change its initial purpose?

I shall focus on the historical museum that has as its focus the history and culture of a society, and of a nation, and how museum objects both narrate and illustrate these. I would like to consider how museums create or endorse identities associated with the nation. Do they explain how an object came to be located in the museum? If the object comes from afar or is linked to an entirely different history and if it was brought forcibly then should it remain in the museum or be taken back to its provenance? As a projection in the future can the museum be digitized as well so as to open up its educative function to a more purposeful degree?

The museum evolved from origins in small private collections that were encouraged as elite activities a few centuries ago. These were claims to particular sensitivities towards special objects from the past that were made by some members of the aristocracy. The interest was limited to those who rather set themselves apart by what was viewed as an uncommon hobby.

In about the eighteenth century collecting objects from the past took a different turn. New questions came to be asked about where were the objects from and what did they suggest about the society that used them. The answer to the first question was simple since such collections were largely of local objects. The second at the literal level was also simple but it gradually got entangled with the larger questions that were being asked about past societies. By the nineteenth century when

colonialism was rampant, the superiority of the colonising society had to be established so that colonialism could claim a certain historical inevitability.

A distinction was made between societies that could claim to have hosted civilizations and others that remained barbaric. Although this was not the only intention of the division nevertheless the conquest of the latter by the former was given legitimacy. Objects that were associated with civilizations were collected and exhibited in historical museums and those from the other societies were displayed in ethnographic galleries. In addition, there was a time dimension that was introduced in the display. It became an institution that collected objects from the past and exhibited them chronologically and in a way that illustrated the characteristic achievements of periods of history. As such it was a visible illustration of the material evidence of the past. This was to be supplemented when archaeology became widespread in the twentieth century and brought more evidence of material cultures.

The collections expanded hugely when objects from the colonies were brought to the museums of Europe. Some objects were kept in the colony and eventually became the nuclei of national museums, but often the objects of greater importance were taken to the colonial homeland. There were many reasons for this: to show the superiority of the coloniser in bringing home the best from the colonies and thus asserting its power and authority quite apart from conquest. It was not necessarily only from the colony itself, but could also be objects of high historical and aesthetic value from the past cultures of the colony. Perhaps it can be seen as a symbolic control over the mind of the colony. Objects from ancient Egypt were transported to various important museums in Europe. With European nationalism asserting an ancestral link with ancient Greece and Rome, some Europeans appropriated objects from these cultures and placed them in their museums. Among these, the Elgin marbles have become the cause of contestation between modern Greece that wants them back and modern Britain that regards them now as a part of its own possessions.



In the process, some from the society of the colonisers developed an interest in the culture of the colony and began a study of it. The nuances of being civilized or not were implicit even if not directly stated as such. The separation of art from ethnography underlined one of the differences. At a conference on museums at the Vatican in 2006 some of us tried to explain the context of these two labels as used in the galleries of the Vatican Museum and why we objected to them.

There is a difference between the looting of objects and collecting the same as gifts or as payments. Delhi is familiar with neighbouring rulers looting the city – Ghengiz Khan, Taimur, Nadir Shah. But some among the British also looted the lesser cities that they conquered. Loot was treated as private property and kept as a trophy or passed on as payment. Gradually more attention was given to just removing objects and shipping them back to Britain either as part of a private collection or to be kept by the state. What was taken had to be reasonably close to the European aesthetic and its provenance had to be from collections of the secular elite or from the more exalted places of worship now in disrepair, such as the panels and sculptures from the *stupa* at Amaravati that were transported to Britain and exhibited in the British Museum.

Colonial acquisitions intended for the museums of the home country had to be exhibited, and kept together in one place so that the collection was impressive and its remembrance would not diminish. Such objects when exhibited had extra value because they came from elite cultures and were used in high status activities, as for instance in upper caste rituals, or in the homes of the elite. They were therefore carefully crafted and were often set with complex symbols and the material used was more long-lasting. For example, a Chola bronze representing the deity Ganesh that was an icon of worship among upper castes, was finely crafted observing the rules of icon making in the *shastras*, illustrating an aesthetic also associated with a scholarly elite, and made from refined metal; such an icon would not be exhibited next to a Ganesh, associated with a tribal society which although also an icon of worship, represented a quite different aesthetic that clearly was not of the elite, suggested a diverse mythology, and was made of inferior

metal. The two were not exhibited side by side in a museum. Yet such juxtaposition would have thrown up some fascinating questions about the icon and its worshippers, although it would have disturbed the definition of Indian culture on the part of both the colonisers and the better-placed colonised.

Objects viewed as constituting the art objects of an elite or high culture were collected and studied as precisely that. For the coloniser this was a way of classifying the culture of the colonised in order to better understand it. For the colonised it was in some ways a more accessible system than the ones discussed in the texts of earlier times although the studies of these objects did draw on these texts as the first step. Gradually the identity of the culture was linked to these studies, an identity that was to be repeatedly re-iterated in the concept of the museum.

Ex-colonies that have now become independent nations are concerned with retrieving objects of their cultural heritage currently displayed in the museums of the erstwhile colonisers. This is a subject that will have to be sorted out preferably by a negotiated settlement of what can be exhibited and where. There is a problem of providing the best environmental conditions for the exhibition of objects that require special temperatures, humidity control, etc; and not every museum can provide these. Nevertheless, where the demand for the return of objects is being made this demand cannot be ignored whatever may be the final agreement.

The next historical marker was when these culturally significant objects became commodities. What earlier had only a historical and aesthetic value now acquired a commercial value as well. This saw the arrival of the art market and art dealers. Initially it was the second level objects that were more easily available. As prices rose, individual buyers who had the wealth began to compete with museums for high quality objects. The latter had the disadvantage that they had to conform to government restrictions on the amount that could be spent on the purchase of art objects. Art became an investment – as contemporary Indian art has become today for many who buy it – and this led to private collections, some that became so large that they are now in

private museums. Art as investment encouraged the theft of art, as with Langdon Warner tearing out mural paintings from the walls at Dunhuang in order to take them back for display in museums in the USA. This demand encouraged local theft in other areas as well.

With nineteenth century colonies becoming independent nations in the mid-twentieth century, ideologies of nationalism that were central to national movements for independence, drew on history and notions of cultural traditions in constructing their new identities. The definition of cultural heritage became a central issue. Heritage generally refers to patrimony and property and this was to be located within the boundaries of the nation. The boundaries were not a reflection of the changing boundaries of histories but were treated as the precise colonial boundaries of modern times that were taken as defining the territory of the nation.

Current boundaries also create legal problems as was evident when the Partition of India took place in 1947 and objects in the museum had to be divided ; as also with the partition of Pakistan in 1971. Bangladesh had an existing museum established during the colonial period that exhibited objects from that region. Fewer objects would have travelled from Karachi to Dhaka, given the diverse history and cultures of the two regions – East and West Pakistan. These are historical situations in which territory becomes a marker in museum collections, a development that has a role in defining cultures but needs to be thought about with care and caution.

Defining cultural heritage raises a multitude of questions especially in regions that have hosted many in-migrating peoples who settled in the region and introduced new cultural items, such as language and literature, religion, architecture and such like. In the sub-continent of India the northern area, the coastal zones and the north-east were always susceptible to in-coming migrant cultures. The Aryan speakers arrived in the north-west in the second millennium BC introducing Indo-Aryan. Later the same area as far as Mathura came under the cultural influence of the Kushans from Bactria with the spread of Gandhara art and the patronage to Buddhism. Still later came the Afghans and

the Turks bringing both Iran and Central Asia into Indian life with a new language, a new religion and architectural styles. Arab traders settled along the coasts and many new cultural and religious communities evolved from their inter-marriage with the local population. The earliest mosques were built in coastal Kerala and Saurashtra. In the North-East there was a constant arrival of the Tibetan and Khmer peoples bringing in new linguistic and artistic forms.

It is often difficult to give a single geographical identity to the more complex artistic styles. This is where the boundaries of the present day create more problems for museums. A case in point is Gandhara art that claims links with Hellenistic, Bactrian and Indian art –a truly hybrid art as some called it in an effort to dismiss it. We have to accept that what comes from the frontier zones of historical states is bound to carry a mixture of styles.

Partially related to this is the problem of cultures that might have had a visible presence but this presence was dimmed when they were inducted into the more dominant ones . In such situations it is necessary to be alert to this happening when the dominant culture is being studied. These subtleties cannot be discussed in a brief label identifying an object. But ignoring them can lead to broad generalizations that are on the edge of being incorrect.

Clarity in historical geography is another necessity. Or else present-day national boundaries that are drawn right through the middle of an ancient culture posit more problems. If the Indus Civilization is claimed as ancestral then both Pakistan and India can make this claim. The provenance of an object should be stated as the actual site where it was found and its geographical location provided. The reference to the modern country is not primary but has to be given. In the past objects have happily crossed the borders of today if only to fox the curators of museums!

The question that also needs to be asked is whether the object changes its meaning. The Mauryan Emperor Ashoka ruling in the third century BC had a number of beautifully polished sandstone pillars, each

inscribed with a set of his edicts, installed in various parts of northern India. These pillars with the edicts would have had a particular historical meaning for the Emperor. Feroz Shah Tughlaq, the fourteenth century AD Sultan of Delhi was intrigued by the pillars. But by now the script could no longer be read so he did not know what was written on them. Nevertheless, he must have assumed that they were historically important, for he had two of them transported to Delhi, and one was placed on the top most part of his citadel. This should be discussed in descriptions or photographs of the citadel and the pillars.

Legal problems get more complicated if museums have to buy objects of their own cultural heritage from foreign museums. Hence the demand that objects taken away during the colonial period from the colony should be voluntarily donated back to the colony. To retrieve these objects through purchase may well bankrupt some of the ex-colonies. It is also argued that since the objects were taken away when none could stop this, it is incumbent on those that took them away to now return them to those who claim them as their cultural heritage.

The question has been asked that should a museum that cannot maintain and exhibit the objects in its collection consider donating or exchanging these, and possibly even selling a few quality objects, to wealthier museums even if they be in another country? It is a hypothetical question since hardly any museum would wish to part with its collection no matter how dire its circumstances. If the idea stems from the notion that there will be a separate category of single trans-national museums, we have a long way to go before such an idea becomes acceptable. One suspects that this is sometimes put forward by the bigger and richer museums as a way of retaining their collections that are now being demanded back.

Another problem that this raises is whether the cultural heritage should be kept only in the country of its origin from this point on, and the export of all objects related to the culture of that country be banned. This introduces an element of unreality since only some objects are of value and importance.

Defining cultures by current boundaries alone leads to other problems. Now that attempts are being made to determine citizenship by the territory in which one is born and by religion, the cultural heritage of such citizens in relation to their country, will become uncertain. This may become more problematic for the next generation. It also raises the question of the cultural heritage of this and the next generation given the speed with which political boundaries of nations change. It might be more appropriate not to use the term 'national' museum but name the museum after the cultural inheritance it exhibits. This will mean replacing the single all-encompassing museum by a few smaller museums, each focused on a particular cultural heritage. Spatially they could be together in the same complex but would address and exhibit a range of what would be called cultural inheritance. One of the ailments of nationalism today is the insistence that culture be defined as monolithic, whereas it is well-established that culture is constituted of multiple forms and combinations and derives from a variety of sources. To speak of a single culture determining the history of a society is pure myth. A complex of smaller museums would make the plurality of cultures more feasible and acceptable.

Even if some museum objects today are seen as residues it is still valid to ask how they contributed to the making of a culture that may no longer be present. Such residues are also helpful in trying to understand what caused cultural change and why.

The museum collects and exhibits items that display cultures and it now includes two other aspects of contemporary life, namely, it assists in endorsing the cultural and national identity of a nation as worked out by those in authority and it helps to educate the public in matters cultural and historic. There is a need for the public to understand what is being displayed and why. This becomes important in educating those that visit the museum.

National museums tend to be celebratory in displaying the highlights of national history and in giving a direction to the concept of the nation's identity. This involves a subtle and sometimes not so subtle change in visualizing the message of the museum. Many national museums began

as colonial depositories with an underlying statement of presenting the power of the coloniser and conforming to the latter's interpretation of the culture and identity of the colony. It was and is seen as the prerogative of the governing authority to define history and culture and use the agency of the museum to do so. To that extent it is still a colonial institution and carries this mark. When such a museum becomes a national museum, elements of this colonial interpretation tend to continue, either to a lesser or a greater degree. It is however now a post-colonial institution and will have to register some new interpretations of history and culture. If these do not conform to the views of those currently governing should the museum present these diverse opinions? If it conforms to the opinion of those governing, then it may result in the museum having to make new presentations each time the government changes. We have seen this happen with state sponsored text-books in Indian state schools, and it results in much confusion. For example, are the galleries showing the Harappan and related artifacts to be called the 'Indus civilization' or the 'Sindhu-Sarasvati' civilization and be equated with the Vedic Aryans.

This has two implications. One is that curators have to be trained not only in museology and presentation but should also be knowledgeable about the discipline on which the exhibition is based. In a historical museum curators must be familiar with diverse historical views and be in a position to defend their choice. The curatorial profession is sometimes limited to just curating a gallery. The second is the degree to which a state museum should be independent of current government ideology when it comes to presenting culture and identity. This may vary from nation to nation depending on how central is the role of the museum to the perception of a national identity.

This is also related to the other extremely relevant subject of who decides on what is to be exhibited – in other words the priorities in the hierarchies of cultures. There are always debates as to which objects should have precedence in a museum. The debates focus on the views of specialists such as archaeologists, art-historians and historians. The debates have to do with the perceptions that specialists have of the

significance of the objects. Is an object frozen in a moment of time or is it a segment in a continuous process? An object in a museum has a life that is linked to a much broader context and cannot be limited to being just a commodity. There is a fundamental difference between a museum and a market.

The state museum is generally funded by government and is therefore susceptible to being controlled by the views and politics of those that constitute the government. And when governments start dictating history and culture, disaster can prevail. Those that have the power, be they administrators or politicians, are seldom familiar with the disciplines that are most widely used in curating the museum. National identity is a sensitive subject but can be ridden over roughshod by those that have a strong political agenda as many governments do. Institutions that are involved in educating the public such as universities and museums are the ones most frequently tampered with. Identity also claims to be based on collective memory in its claim to be representing the past. There is currently a substantial debate on whether collective memory subconsciously collates isolated memories or whether it is deliberately constructed by sections of society and imposed on the rest, and which is then claimed as a spontaneous collective memory.

With the state museum as a public museum becoming a major cultural institution it becomes necessary to observe its relationship with what were earlier the lesser private museums. Private museums had a different function. They were institutions that bestowed status and class on their owners and the latter were frequently members of the elite. Their concern was less the educating of the public since the collections may or may not have been open to the public. They often were not in earlier times and were only gradually opened to a wider viewership. They were more concerned with the aesthetic pleasure and the potential investment that these collections provided. Collections covered whatever was of interest from fossils to fabrics.

The social group from which the artifacts came was more limited as were the visitors in the initial stages. It spoke to a uniform aesthetic of members of the aristocracy and the wealthy middle-class. Specialized



textiles, illustrated books, paintings and household objects were not yet commodities. Jahangir the Mughal emperor put together the paintings that he commissioned of plants and animals. The Japanese aristocracy at one point collected the small netsuke. The motivation for the collection was curiosity and an aesthetic interest in the object. These were not commodities and quite consciously not treated as such. People of social status and fashion were associated with such collections.

But private museums have now advanced in scope and presentation and in some places have the same status as public museums. There is an essential difference since the public museum addresses the nation whereas the private museum addresses the community and often the local community. This is evident from the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum in Mumbai, the Calico Museum in Ahmedabad and the Kelkar Museum in Pune, to mention just a few. As private museums they can deviate up to a point. They can also confine their exhibits to particular categories of objects or even a personal whim, since their focus is on that category rather than a wider range including other categories. This could change if they are converted into public museums.

Having said what I have, let me turn to some aspects that I think are worth considering when we think of the museum of the future. Museums should be so structured that they provide the possibility of changing the juxtaposition of information so as to encourage both the emergence of new knowledge as well as fresh ways of seeing the function of the museum. This would require facilitating communication between various categories of knowledge livened up by connections to the objects in the museum.

A museum need not be a sprawling number of galleries each devoted to a segment of historical or cultural information. It could be set out in modules, each module focusing on a theme. For instance, there are now enough objects for a module on the Indus civilization, going from pre-Harappan to post-Harappan. In addition to the rise and decline as normally shown there could be a section on why cities arose, another on the nature of urbanism as suggested by the material cultures, and another section on possible causes of their decline. One section could

be demonstrating a rise in sea level in the second millennium BC, showing what the effect would be in coastal areas and how this would affect inland locations. Another by contrast could consider the drying up of inland areas where climate change wreaked havoc. Such exhibits are likely to attract greater public interest than the usual display of objects with little commentary. Was the dryness due to deforestation? Can the decline of the Harappan cities be ascribed primarily to such changes? Did such changes occur in later times as well with similar consequences? Coming closer to our times a module on industrialization in Europe cannot stop with changes in Europe as it would have to include an exhibition that refers to colonialism and nationalism in relation to the changes in European society, as well as the European exploitation of other parts of the world.

This would be a change from galleries in museums that currently project the civilizations of the world as largely segregated, each in its own gallery. This is in keeping with the original concept of civilization as worked out in the nineteenth century. Each civilization was distinct with demarcated territories characterized by a single dominant language and a single dominant religion. Civilizations were viewed as unique and as having evolved in virtual isolation. Each was its own golden age and its classic period. However a century later civilizations began to be seen as essentially porous. Their periods of highest achievement were often times when they were in close contact with other civilizations. There was considerable borrowing and lending resulting in an admixture of knowledge conducive to its advance. This is amply demonstrated in the history of categories of knowledge that we label as mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. Civilizations grew through contacts.

The attempt in the museums of today therefore should be to show the porosity of the home societies and their contacts with others and what resulted from these. An area whose history and culture were virtually dependent on this porosity and contact was Central Asia. It was not only the link area between India and China with silk and horses travelling westwards and eastwards as major items of trade, and extending

as far as the Eastern Mediterranean, but was also the conduit for the expansion of Buddhism from India into China and later the coming of Islam. Yet Central Asia has been treated as an island unto itself. One museum where its pivotal role in the Asian land mass was made clear was in the renovated galleries of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

My projection for a museum of the future is based on this changing background in terms of what the museum might convey as a form of new knowledge. It also assumes that only some people are in a position to visit major museums. Among those that do visit there are not large numbers that understand why they are there and what to make of the objects they see. My contention is that most museums are less interested in visitors who have little knowledge of what is being exhibited and address themselves more easily to those that have a preliminary interest and some partial knowledge. If people are unable to visit a museum for whatever reason, can the museum be brought to them? And for those who do visit the museum and are interested in knowing more can further knowledge be provided in an uncomplicated way?

It probably can by using digital technology. A digital museum would be a museum on the internet. Perhaps an experiment can be made with all the exhibits in one gallery of an existing major museum. Done successfully, this becomes a way of providing a parallel digital museum that can be used by both those actually visiting the museum who want to understand an object in depth, or by those unable to visit the museum. Importantly, this is also a way of displaying – at least on the internet – objects that are in storage and cannot be exhibited for lack of space.

In the parallel digital museum each object can be projected from a variety of angles so that there is a sense of seeing every facet of the object. The facility for enlargement allows the visibility of details sometimes even better than an actual view. Shuffling and juxtaposing the projections facilitates seeing facets of the object itself and make possible comparison with other objects, or even other categories of information. For instance, if one is viewing the projections of the Kailas temple at Ellora, other projections of similar temples, or details of these, can be juxtaposed, or for that matter if the really curious wish to see the rock

formation of the Deccan trap into which the temple was cut, this can also be shown.

Each projection would be accompanied by a text providing the necessary details, and also if required, the discussion on the projection. Minimum information, such as chronology, provenance, the reason for the transportation to the museum from where it originated, the material from which it is made, the significance of the object itself, and the patron, all this information would be a requirement for every object. Other requirements can be added as and when thought necessary. There could be free flowing statements about the object from various scholars and even visitors.

Attention can be drawn to special aspects that some think important: what are the special features that should be observed; what do these features suggest about other links and connections; what have been the controversies about the object; and comments from those who have visited the site and the museum. In each of these sections there would be cross-indexing to other objects and views that have a bearing on the object. The written text then becomes like a short chapter in a book but is continuously up-dated with an inter-meshing of knowledge and the availability of more knowledge at a click.

The visitor can go round the actual museum and at some point consult the digital text if she so wishes. Or she can be satisfied with just the smaller audio that many museums give to visitors. But these audios do not have any visual material to pinpoint details or make comparisons. Or she may visit the digital museum if she wishes to familiarize herself with the object or the many more aspects of the object. The digital museum can be carried on a cell phone into the museum.

The digital medium in facilitating juxtaposition opens up the universe through creating links or even sometimes positing barriers. Prehistoric rock art for instance is an example of how people unconnected seem to have similar aspirations and fears and express these in a remarkably recognizable and familiar way in different parts of the world. Visiting a museum to see reproductions of the paintings of Bhimbetka (near Bho-

pal in central India) virtually demands of the visitor that she turn to the paintings at Lascaux and similar sites for comparison. A sensitive curator may display in juxtaposition paintings from other rock art but it be easier to view them on the relevant digital museum. Projected life-size on an empty wall would make the juxtaposition even more pertinent.

In an effort to understand the link between our past and us, the historical museum is immensely important. Its importance lies not merely in giving us the continuities from the past that go into making our present, but it can also direct us towards the crevices and nuances that would further illumine this understanding.

*Jyotindra Jain*

## The Museum as Forum

The museum is an urban institution like the university. Both, as they exist today in India, have their origins in the colonial period. But the rise of the institution of the museum, even in the Western world, is umbilically connected to the European geographical voyages that led to the colonisation of numerous societies. Colonisation had, besides its economic and political objectives, an epistemological dimension rooted in the 18th century era of Enlightenment – which became embodied in the aesthetics of curiosity around other cultures and resulted in the emergence of curiosity cabinets all over Europe—the ancestors of the modern museum.

The museum, both as an urban and elite institution, has a pivotal role to play not only in the terms of connoisseurship of art and culture but potentially as a “force in urban revitalization”. The most radical example of such an urban revitalisation would be the coming of the Guggenheim Museum in 1997 in Bilbao – a relatively uncharted industrial port city in northern Spain, which literally changed the face of the city overnight to the extent that in the first three years of its opening the city had four million visitors and earned 500 million Euro in economic activity around the museum. Yet, the Guggenheim, Bilbao, is an exception and not the most representative example of the nutritive inter-relationship between the museum and the city in terms of its cultural and intellectual life, as would be the case with other museums, such as the British Museum in London, the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the Louvre in Paris, Museum Island in Berlin, and Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (erstwhile Prince of Wales Museum) and the Bhau Daji Lad Museum (BDLM) in Mumbai, to mention only the most prominent ones at the cost of numerous others that have been instrumental in nurturing the cultural life of cities across the world.

The museum has essentially been a place of confinement for fragments of culture, fragments which are made to speak synecdochically for the

whole culture. According to the renowned museum theorist Duncan F. Cameron's familiar formulation, there are two distinct museum-related stances: the traditional one of the museum as temple, and newer one of the museum as forum.<sup>1</sup> The museum as temple has the conventional role of collecting, preserving, documenting and displaying artefacts (*vastu*). As temple, where art is enshrined for adoration, the museum has connotations addressed clearly by the German word 'museal' – moribund, dead or passive, and therefore 'museum-like'. So to speak, the museum was kind of still-born in India, and a large number of regional museums have been in that state for more than a century. Most museums in India have simply remained object-centric, revolving around the imaginary idea of uniqueness, authenticity and "masterpiece" – as if cultural objects were primarily addressed to the museum. As pointed out by Thomas, "[Museum] objects are not what they were made to be but what they have become. This is to contradict a pervasive identification in museum research and material culture studies which stabilizes the identity of a thing in its fixed and founded material form."<sup>2</sup> Was there ever one single identity or one linear life of a cultural object? Wasn't the object, even while being a part of a living tradition, passing through many lives and many identities? The point of the many lives of an object is best exemplified by Richard H. Davis<sup>3</sup> as he traces the journey of a Hindu cultic image through many identities – at its birth it is an object of craftsmanship; through its consecration it becomes an object of worship; through its theft and circulation in the art market it turns into a commodity; and onwards through its pedestalization in a museum it acquires the status of an object of art.

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<sup>1</sup> See Duncan F. Cameron, "The Museum, a temple or the forum", *Curator. The Museum Journal*, XIV, 1, March 1971, pp. 11/23, accessed online at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.2151-6952.1971.tb00416.>, on 31 May 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, London, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (University Press, New Jersey, 1997), especially the chapter "Loss and Recovery of Ritual Self", pp. 222-259.

This brings us to Cameron's second museum-related stance, namely the museum as forum. The three pivotal constituents of the museum – the collection, categorisation and representation – are historically, socially and politically permeated. How? In today's museum viewing, the line between the visible and the critical appears to be receding. There is more to museum objects, their categorization and the display than what is manifest – and if we lend our ear to the object in the silence of the museum, we can perhaps hear it whispering in Shakespeare's voice: "I am not what I am." Of course, minus the cunning of Iago. Hopefully!

How can the line between the visible and the critical be thinned out? This essay aims at elevating the museum from a passive entity to an engaging forum – where free, imaginative and sometimes provocative conversations are encouraged and evolved, aimed at creating discerning audiences. This is where the city and the museum need to interact meaningfully.

Museums are increasingly shifting from merely celebrating masterpieces to engaging with the very notion of the museum itself, as well as with the interpretation of the collections through various forms of discourses such as lectures, seminars, curated workshops and such others. In other words, undertaking exercises in conscious and discursive viewing. Judging by the number of invites pertaining to such activities that museums across the world send out, it may be said that it has taken a lead in turning this notion of the museum as forum into a reality. As an example, the city of Mumbai, with three major museums – Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, and the National Gallery of Modern Art with their growing numbers of interactive programmes are strengthening the notion of more inclusive "civic seeing."

Yet, we must keep our eyes and ears open to new critical debates that are ensuing from museums and academia around the world, pertaining to the histories and ethics of museum collecting and the issues of representing the Other in the museum, which too need to be brought into the orbit of the museum as forum.



If the histories of museum collecting are rooted in the noble and virtuous cause of the preservation of heritage, they are equally embedded in plunder, violence and deprivation; if the museum's classificatory mechanisms are meant to systematize a range of cultural material, they also hierarchise and divide objects and societies into high and low, mainstream and marginal; and if the exhibitions and displays are intended to share and interpret the cultural material with the visitors, they also remain entangled in the predicaments of representation.

Today, the museum's conventional role of being the collector and custodian; conservator and curator, and interpreter and exhibitor of objects is being discussed as never before, to include the ethical and social histories of the museum's collecting and representational practices and it is these histories which must be a part of a museum of the future.

Post-colonial studies have been largely engaged with the social, political and economic effects of colonialism, but the subject of ethics and modus operandi of collecting the colony has only now begun to come into sharp focus. Today, there is a heated debate raging in the museum world about the need for provenance research and the restitution of cultural property to the societies of their origin.

The history of protest against unethical acquisition and plunder of cultural objects in the West goes back to at least the 3rd century BC. The Greek historian Polybius (in *Histories*, Book 9) had "proposed a foundation for a political theory of acquisitions."<sup>4</sup> Polybius, having lived as a prisoner of war in Rome for 15 years describes the pain of being invited "to partake in the humiliating spectacle of passing through the various cities [of the Roman Empire] where his home country's objects have now become the mere spoils of plundering."<sup>5</sup> Polybius cautioned

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<sup>4</sup> Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* – a Report submitted to Emmanuel Macron, the President of France and published online in November 2018 and in English translation, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

the future conquerors “not to create calamities of the other into the ornamentation of their nation.”<sup>6</sup>

Brushing aside the economic argument, for justifying extortions, and undervalued purchase of a coveted object from a conquered person, Cicero, the first century BC Roman statesman, wrote: “If he had the faculty of choice at his disposal, he would have never chosen to sell what resides in his sanctuary and what had been left to him by his ancestors.”<sup>7</sup> Similar responses from some Indian viewers surfaced when the Joseph Hotung gallery, housing most of the 120 masterpieces from the stupa of Amaravati was inaugurated at the British Museum in 2012. The then Deputy Keeper of the British Museum went on record saying that India never asked for the carvings to be returned.<sup>8</sup>

The strange, yet unquestioned practice of displaying chopped-off heads of the Buddha or a Hindu god from their full-figure sculptured images in museums, installed on a pedestal generally spiked on a rod, has emerged as a common sight in the galleries of Indian art. We have become so accustomed to this museum-generated, self-contained aesthetics of these reconfigured tableaux of violence and fragmentation originating from the aestheticized museum displays that we forget that more often than not this museal convention has its roots in the widespread and unethical colonial and neo-colonial collecting practices. Such issues, too, need to be a part of the conversation around the museum as it strives to become a truly discursive urban forum.<sup>9</sup>

This brings us to the issue of provenance research as it is understood today. Most Western museums have opened centres for provenance research to filter the entry of unethical acquisitions into their collec-

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Amit Roy, “British Museum displays masterpieces of Buddhist sculptures from Amravati”, in: *India Today*, December 21, 2012, accessed on August 2019.

<sup>9</sup> See Jyotindra Jain, “Objects and their Journeys: In Pursuit of the Provenance of Things”, in: (Post)Kolonialismus und kulturelles Erbe. Internationale Debatten im Humboldt Forum, Hanser Publishing, Munich, Autumn 2020.

tions, and many have expanded their scope to include, *ex-post-facto*, colonial and wartime acquisitions. I believe that Indian museums today need to be aware of how much of Indian art heritage has been vandalized/exported abroad, and what their trajectories have been. Colonial appropriations and postcolonial smuggling have deprived India of its art treasures – scores of sculptures and paintings, entire temples and stupas, and most of the exquisite illustrated Mughal manuscripts and Rajasthani and Pahari miniatures are outside of India. Recently, more than 20 African countries have put in a claim for the return of their art objects, which triggered a voluminous report by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy commissioned by the French President Emmanuel Macron in 2018 making a case for the phased-out restitution of these objects brought to France during the French colonial rule and after.<sup>10</sup> According to the provenance research of the report, there are 69,000 African objects in the British Museum; 37,000 in Vienna; 180,000 in Belgium; 75,000 in Berlin; and the Vatican and just one museum in Paris combined, 70,000.<sup>11</sup>

This report and the President's resulting announcement that the colonially acquired objects would be restituted to Africa have caused a flutter and a debate in the Western museum world. India's museums striving to become a forum need to be aware of and discuss these developments. Most Indian museums are unaware of this ongoing debate about the ethical issues centering around museum collecting, especially pertaining to the return of the Nazi period plunders as well as to provenance research and the restitution of colonially acquired objects in Western museums. First of all, museums in India, in aspiring to become genuine forums, need to put together a coordinated documentation of all the published material pertaining to the debate around these issues and circulate those among themselves, publish their findings in the press and organize symposia involving relevant university departments to understand the arguments on both sides. Until this awareness is generated among museums, universities, art scholars, government author-

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<sup>10</sup> Sarr and Savoy, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Sarr and Savoy, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

ities, and the general public in India, museums in India will continue to remain in their colonial slumber isolated from the global debate, leading to the loss of material as well as intellectual property. The stagnancy and the consequent vacuum arising out of the absence of any informed debate around these issues may also pave the way for ideologically driven nationalist forces at home, on the one hand, and for apologists of colonial acquisitions abroad, on the other, enabling both to exploit the vulnerable Indian museum space.

In this context, it would be only apt to mention that any debate in India around global museum ethics and collection policies should include the history and practices of museum collecting in the museums in India too. This is because the cultural diversity of Indian society coupled with the complex power imbalances inherent in the history of its governance has inevitably led to the deprivation of the cultural property of several socially vulnerable groups in the process of collecting their cultures and even interpreting and canonizing these for them. Moreover, this would automatically shift the focus of the debate from nation to society.

The question of the restitution of Indian objects abroad, at this point, may be a distant goal, but in the context of discussing the issue of the museum as forum, I would like to suggest the idea of establishing a National Centre for Provenance Research in India for compiling a comprehensive digital inventory of all Indian objects in the museums and private collections abroad, and conduct research – tracking down their origin and the circumstances and routes which led to this mass exodus during and after the colonial era or even after the implementation of the Antiquities Registration Act in the 1970s. Momentarily, even if the contentious issue of the restitution of these objects is left aside, a detailed academic exercise of research and data collection would be of immense epistemic value for art historical research as well as for the study of aesthetics and politics of the museum under the rubric of ‘New Museology.’ This will provide a wider ethical context than the mere routine art-historical and aesthetic approach to the museum, expanding into its broader political histories and sociology while letting its objects tell their own stories of provenance. Moreover, such a

shared and unbiased exercise in provenance research will probably trigger more ethical strategies for the decolonization of the museum. It will also question the concept of the global museum because, once a global museum is genuinely decolonized, it will relinquish its global claim and move towards a more democratic and ethical model. In other words, the decolonized museum will also begin to be deglobalized.

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Moving from the topic of generating awareness about the ethics of museum collecting to the issue of looking at museum objects, Nicholas Thomas once said that to look *at* an object is not the same as to look *into* it. “Looking beyond surface also means looking into contexts.”<sup>12</sup> To become a true forum, the museums need to encourage viewers to look into a museum object, layer by layer, and from multiple vantage points – identifying and connecting dots around it – re-constructing an intertwined narrative which goes far beyond the aesthetic gazing of a museum object – which often proliferates under the bracket of “art-appreciation”. Most of the “art-appreciation” sessions end up in locating the museum objects’ first provenance, admiration of its formal qualities, its stylistic development, and the interpretation of its theme or iconography. This standard approach often tends to become stale and predictive and an end in itself. The forum itself then ironically begins to adopt the role of a temple. The role of the museum as forum needs to be that of a liberator which metaphorically emancipates the museum objects from their glass-case existence into a wider temporal, spatial and imaginary field. When we talk of construing the museum as a forum, we need to drag the museum objects into this space of wide cultural, historical and imaginary configurations of interpretations, not aimed at finding some sort of ultimate truth about the object but to find out that such a process of imaginary reconfigurations of the object by itself would be much more revealing and liberating.

Let me take just one example of placing museum objects in multiple and shifting historical and conceptual frames – what Michael Taussig calls

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<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Thomas, *Oceanic Art*, (Thames&Hudson, London, 1995), p. 9.

“the bodily unconscious”. My example pertains to a lecture-cum-workshop that I conducted at a small museum of traditional Indian textiles in Delhi in 2016, under the rubric of museum as forum.

At this experimental workshop, I took up for discussion questions such as what is the link between the colourful Indian textiles and the global slave trade; or between the British Indian indigo production and the European espionage on its cultivation and processing; or the American Civil War and urbanization of Mumbai, and such other. Through this exercise we moved away from the usual aesthetic appreciation of textiles into a larger sphere of their lesser known histories. We talked about the Western fear of colour; how Goethe’s colour theory which saw the world divided into societies of refinement as in northern Europe who had disinclination to colours while the “Men in a state of nature, ... uncivilized nations and children, have great fondness for colours in their utmost brightness.”<sup>13</sup> We talked about how the “rubbi-shi” Indian cotton goods (colourful) imported to Britain were directly exported from the British ports straight to West Africa and bartered against slaves and ivory.<sup>14</sup>

Looking at the use of indigo dyed fabrics, while going around the museum galleries, we discussed, besides the beauty of the dye, and the known issues of inhuman violence and oppression of the indigo farmers leading to the revolt in Champaran in Bihar and the intervention of Gandhi as well as the performances of the play *Nil Darpan* and the legislation of the 1876 Dramatic Performances Act (an Act for the better control of public dramatic performances), but also how the Spanish colonisers partook of the multi-million Asian indigo cultivation and trade by growing it in their middle and South American colonies using slave labour, or how the French systematically conducted espionage on the British colonial indigo production with the objective of introducing indigo plantation and manufacture in French Africa.<sup>15</sup> This led our

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Taussig, *What Colour is the Sacred?* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2009), p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 133-135.

<sup>15</sup> Pierre-Paul Darrac and Willem van Schendel, *Global Blue. Indigo and*

workshop group to discuss the then economy of indigo that 4 million kilograms of indigo, worth 24 lakh pound was produced in 2000 factories in Bengal alone.

In the same workshop we discussed the issue of how the embargo on American King Cotton during the American Civil War (1861-65), facilitated the entry of Indian cotton in the world market, which led to Bombay benefitting to the tune of 70 million pound sterling in those four years, giving a hefty boost to massive urbanization of the city of Mumbai.

In the context of Bombay-Lancashire textile trade, issues of *swadeshi*, the rise of *khadi* and its aesthetic counterpart handloom too came up in the workshop.

The two-hour workshop on the museum as forum, at this small museum of Indian textiles crossed several centuries of aesthetic, social, political, nationalist, economic and urban histories of India. The idea of museum as forum has limitless possibilities of framing the museum objects, and our museums need to turn in that direction.

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Besides the issue of objects and collections, there is also the question of museological taxonomies. The museum in India, along with its colonial genesis, also inherited the system of fragmenting cultural heritage into art and craft, classical and folk, sacred and secular, dominant and subaltern, traditional and modern, etc., without evolving much of valid critical criteria. These binary oppositional categories are still blindly followed in most museum documentations—a form of categorization which by implication divides and hierarchises the society into high and low – scheduled and unscheduled communities.

Let me take two examples of how, on experimental basis, bridges can be built in museum galleries, between the contemporary art practices

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*Espionage in Colonial Bengal*, (The University Press Limited, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2006), especially the chapter “Agro-industrial Espionage: The Darrac Report”, pp. 33-41.

and their historical counterparts. Both examples are from the so-called Humboldt Lab in Berlin – an experimental Lab set up in 2015 for exploring innovative possibilities of interpreting and curating historical and ethnological museum objects from contemporary perspectives. The Lab invited practicing artists, curators, theatre persons and scholars, to evolve contemporary strategies for re-contextualising museum displays. One of the distinguished projects of the Lab was “Beauty Parlour”. “In a separate auditorium set up as a hyper-realistic beauty parlour, visitors entered one by one and found themselves in a narrow, fragrant chamber, where they became part of the unfolding story – as the guest of beauty expert Maimuna Difini, who inducted them into the cosmetic practices and wedding rituals of East African coastal towns.” The Lab then asked: “Doesn’t a project like this offer a more immediate experience of the context behind African artefacts?”<sup>16</sup>

This bold and innovative curating caused immense curiosity among the public and with a single stroke connected the past with the present with all the transformative magic that a contemporary art installation is capable of conjuring up.

In another experiment at the Lab, an artist recreated the 18th century Chinese Imperial throne from the collection of the Museum of Asian Art in Dahlem – drenched with blood-red paint invoking the memories of Imperial Chinese torture and atrocities.<sup>17</sup> The Museum to be a contemporary forum sometimes needs to take a more multi-disciplinary, exploratory and even radical approach to enable more open and enlightening interpretations of its objects.

In this context, there is the example of one such unique and experimental Indian museum – the Tribal Museum in Bhopal, opened in 2013. Here, several myths and legends of the tribal communities of Madhya Pradesh were re-interpreted in the form of large-scale visual installa-

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<sup>16</sup> Angela Rosenberg, “Game of Thrones / Project Description”, in: *The Humboldt Lab Dahlem. Museum Experiments on the Way to the Humboldt-Forum*, published by Humboldt Lab Dahlem, Berlin 2015, <https://d-nb.info/1079569847/34>, p. 66.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



tions by groups of tribal and urban artists using traditional and modern materials and imagery, and in the process re-interpreting the traditional tribal legends alongside their journeys into their own contemporaneity. At the core of its concept and development, this museum located its content in the very process of experimentation rather than following any pre-existing models, such as the “museum of mankind” or the “ethnographic museum” or the museum of “vernacular arts,” and thereby liberated itself from the constraints of already clichéd stereotypes. The museum adopted the model of a spontaneous “work in progress” in its making, involving tribal as well as modern artists, ethnographers, researchers, architects, field-workers, technicians, etc., who together created this mega installation, collectively evolving ideas and strategies for representation and display over a period of two years. According to Shampa Shah,<sup>18</sup> one of its first think-tank members, there was an informally constituted multi-disciplinary core team comprising some of the former staffers of the Tribal Academy, such as Ashok Mishra and Vasant Nirgune; the artist Chandan Singh Bhatti and Shah herself who had worked for a long time as a researcher and curator at the Manav Sangrahalaya (Museum of Man) in Bhopal. Additionally, there was a team of young urban artists and yet another one comprising mould-makers, laser cutters, welders, carpenters, etc. These teams collaborated with a group of various tribal men and women working in clay, bamboo, reed, wood, pigment and metals, who had been a part of the living myths and rituals of their respective communities. It was these informally constituted teams that interacted with each other to evolve the museum in its present form.

One of the leading lights of these teams was Chandan Singh Bhatti, a practising modern artist who had worked as Exhibition Officer at Roopankar Gallery in Bharat Bhavan, a multi-arts complex in Bhopal. Much of the contemporary visualization of the tribal myths apparently came from the modern artists led by Bhatti. Similarly, a few of the installations at the Tribal Museum are revised and replicated versions of an earlier exhibition entitled “Mythology Trail,” curated by Shampa

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<sup>18</sup> Shampa Shah in correspondence with the author in May 2020.

Shah in association with Dulal Manna at Manav Sangrahalaya in the mid-1990s. This very brief overview of the innovative process of creating a path-breaking tribal museum in a small Indian town will give a glimpse of their innovative approach.

I am concluding this essay with the example of the Tribal Museum in Bhopal because it questions the very notion of the stereotypical ethnographic museum and in the process demolishes the unarticulated binaries of tribal and urban or traditional and contemporary, and, above all, challenges the much celebrated museological category of “authenticity”.

## Museum as Evidence, Justice as Culture

This essay is as much a manifesto for the future as it is a reflection of the past on the institutions that have recorded history and disseminated it through language and representation. Both these methods that have in their oeuvre been largely exclusive, seldom emancipatory, never transformatory. It is needless to state that the museum has been a colonial enterprise, in its approach, scale, and affect. But its legacy within the postcolonial has been no different either; its post-coloniality barely arrived. If at all, a restoration of an internal colonialism that shaped even more vehemently how 'Indianness' would transpire in a homogeneous national imagination.

The Indian State time and again has actively mediated public discourse through cultural intervention, while a cultural policy has always only been on the anvil after several advisory committees were formed and disbanded. This may be for the best, for a diverse, itinerant and inclusive cultural policy is an unimaginable artefact for the Indian State to produce that has been preoccupied with producing a singular narrative of nationhood, where none exists. For a society in constant flux, can the museum afford a position of a-politics, followed by an induced redundancy? The traditional museum has served as a place of preserving artefacts of value derived from a diverse range of contexts, zoological, geological, botanical and archaeological, as well as art, architectural or historical contexts amongst others as a result of which historians and scholars are able to build narratives of the past through admissible evidence. At this juncture, a reading of the relationship between those artefacts that have assumed value, largely through hegemonic societal structures and their transformation into artefacts as legitimate evidence needs to be examined closely. The artefact that has historically been used as evidence has been selected from the repertoire of the conquest, external or internal. This nexus between history as a knowledge system, museums and the State when laid bare can be ruptured by a differ-

ent kind of evidence.<sup>1</sup> The museum of the future will necessarily need to shift the nature of the evidence itself.

In jurisprudence, evidence could be testimony, documentary, or physical that is presented to support an assertion, each more fragile than the other. These forms of evidence are conceptually sacrosanct but are greatly compromised. In the case of violence, the admissible evidence could be the testimony of a witness, a weapon of violence or the body that endured the violence. All of these are increasingly vulnerable to manipulation or disappearance of which we have seen various examples in the recent pasts. Within the realm of history, these forms of evidence may not be adequate to encompass large sections of society that have been systematically denied a historical consciousness in the first place. What then would be the form of evidence to legitimise histories of the oppressed people? To propose ‘diversity’ or ‘inclusivity’ within the present museum structure as we know it may be too little too late, likewise to open the museum’s collection and merely represent the marginal may neither be sufficient nor just. What then would be the role of the museum when the State is in denial of its own amnesia? Can the museum offer itself to be the site of generative evidence that restores and reconstructs history, challenges the narratives of grandeur and antiquity of the brahminical nationalist State?

To build historical temper, one would certainly need to prepare ourselves to make rigorous connections between the events of the past and their implications on the future, but to do so we would need first to build evidence that is rooted in experience, however temporal it may seem, of those that have been deliberately forgotten and erased by the State. Evidence, which is rooted in experiences of denial and exclusion, of inequality and violence that may take the form of newer aesthetic practices, a materiality of the everyday, as well as a culture emanating from the collective memory of pain and anger. It is with this backdrop that I want to imagine a museum of the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for “Indian” Pasts?” *Representations*, no. 37 (1992): 1-26. Accessed April 14, 2020. doi:10.2307/2928652

## SPECULATING A MUSEUM

The formulation of the museum of the future cannot be derived only from ideological or aesthetic positions but will have to see these positions permeate into an operational museology. It is the day-to-day operations of a museum, its regulatory structures, its institutional protocols of control, its prescribed etiquette for spectatorship, its lexicon and vestimentary codes that will have to transform to include and comfort large cross sections of society. The silences of long and endless corridors will have to protest dominant idioms in language, the vocabulary of the art museum will have to recognise and articulate a common aspiration for society. The nature of the artefact may not necessarily be rooted in materiality or accept word as evidence but will have to find methods of displaying a temporal, performative archive. The traditional museum has demonstrated that the two spatial components of the museum i.e. back of the room and front of the room have disproportionate ratios, the collections are larger in volume than display. A museum of the future may need to reimagine the ‘collection’ and its form; the repository of artefacts may be easily available and rampant in access and hence may not be precious, although its framing, its labels might need exquisite forms of empathy. The museum will have to prepare itself to be a repository of self-assertive political and aesthetic practices committed to marginality as a manner of imagining society, a potential site to undo a prolonged protected ignorance<sup>2</sup> of centuries forming impenetrable networks of historical narratives. Its futurity will arrive when the processes through which narratives are formed are constructed by those that are the protagonists within them. Materiality and orality are often posited as contentious, the archival or authorised has garnered more legitimacy over remembrance, but as a matter of methodology we know that the processes through which

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<sup>2</sup> Y.S. Alone, “Language, Representation and Protected Ignorance”, <https://archive.indianculturalforum.in/2017/03/14/y-s-alone-language-representation-protected-ignorance/> (draft paper for a public lecture).

historians secure access to pasts is highly vexed, as is the association of memory with record.<sup>3</sup>

The museum may be imagined as a space that affords a play with time. Its future may lie in the everydayness of tragedies and the ordinariness of triumph. The time that the museum wishes to collect may be in the future, in a possible infinity, for the evidence of citizenship lies in the everyday. Ultimately the museum is a civic structure; its relationship and accountability to citizenry is essential. It is within the same citizenry that the museum may have a role to play vis-a-vis justice.

It is by no means in competition or even an alternative to formal justice systems, but the museum does have a potential to formulate an alternative to legality. The relationship of legality and justice remains fraught. Within our colonial inheritance is also the bequeathal of law, whose relationship with justice is increasingly adversarial. What is legal may not be just, what is just is not necessarily legal,<sup>4</sup> the museum of the future could recognise and operate across these fault lines. Within legal frameworks, the onus of producing evidence is mostly on the victims of violence, in the case of structural violence, women, trans and oppressed communities bear this burden. Untouchability has been deemed illegal in India but is practiced rampantly in the country, in fact in more and more sophisticated forms today.<sup>5</sup> This rather displaced responsibility needs restoration, more so if historical consciousness pervades a citizenry of which the museum is a vibrant participant. The shared responsibility of producing evidence within the museum translates into a shared commitment towards justice based cultural production. We have known for too long that freedom arrives only when freedom

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<sup>3</sup> Shahid Amin, "Event, Memory, Metaphor: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992", Oxford University Press, Delhi (1995).

<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant has articulated the paradox as, 'what is legal is not moral.'

<sup>5</sup> Dave Armstrong & Christian Davenport, (2010). Understanding Untouchability: A Comprehensive Study of Practices and conditions in 1589 villages. [esocialsciences.com](http://esocialsciences.com), Working Papers. (This report was led by Navsarjan Trust with a focus on Gujarat state but one can extrapolate this to be true for the entire country.)

belongs to everyone; how could the museum imbibe this understanding and transform its spectatorship into an actively engaged justice based culture?

The museum of the above propositions would be engaged in co-constructing a critical culture that may challenge the consciousness of dominance through the artefact, archive and its performance. It would influence a culture that contributes to a citizenship that derives its morality from constitutionalism, by extension, a morality derived from criticality. We have seen continually that those countercurrents in cultural practice that attempt to dismantle predominant structures are either co-opted or deemed as marginal, at best called unusual. These interjections of the museum of the future must not resort to placelessness or obscurity but claim the mainstream.

#### REFLECTIONS ON PRACTISING CRITICAL MUSEOLOGY

Conflictorium is a Museum of Conflict founded in 2013 in Ahmedabad, India, a city that has been intensely polarised and segregated for over 2 decades, in a state that has also been known as a laboratory of sorts for the manufacturing of historical narrative and a dystopic nationalistic future.<sup>6</sup> Amongst the many circumstances that led to the setting up of the museum was an heirless Parsi woman by the name of Bachoo Nagarwala donating her 100 year old house to the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), two rights-based organisations with an experience of 25 years in conflict transformation work (in Gujarat and other parts of the country) and one final year design school thesis project.<sup>7</sup> Its premise was largely derived from two observations:

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<sup>6</sup> Howard Spodek, "In the Hindutva Laboratory: Pogroms and Politics in Gujarat, 2002." *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (2010): 349-99. Accessed April 14, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/27764659](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27764659).

<sup>7</sup> Centre for Social Justice is a socio-legal non-governmental organisation, Janvikas is a organisational development and support institution and Navsarjan Trust is a human rights organisation with a focus on Dalit rights. All of these organisations are based in Ahmedabad but work across the region with an experience of 30 years in the field. Conflictorium was conceptualised as a

*i. an all pervasive culture of silence*

The recurrent manner of speaking about Gujarat and thinking of its political behaviour has been experiencing a Gandhian hangover, which evangelises non-violence but simultaneously becomes an euphemism to convert the seen into the unseen, followed by strengthened structural violence. The fact that Gujarat was born of a linguistic conflict with Marathi speaking Bombay Presidency in 1960 remains a less acknowledged historical fact; therefore all repeated acts of violence are imagined only as an ‘exception’ to the norm of a negotiated peace.

*ii. an augmenting culture of violence*

In contemporary memory, Year 2002 – a pogrom against Muslims tends to take centre stage as an exemplar of violence but this stands in the company of a history of episodic violence, e.g. the communal violence of 1965 or 1985 and the continuous unreported violence against minorities after 2002 or atrocities against Dalits in Gujarat like the Golana *hathyakand* in 1986 or the Una atrocity case in 2016. The residue of these incidences had permeated into the aftermath in the form of housing and livelihood discrimination, linguistic and behavioural slurs, withholding of opportunity, inaccess to public infrastructure, above all a perpetuation of a diminished dignity of the marginalised.

Conflictorium was not missioned to undertake the memorialisation of these incidences of violence, but rather to undertake the grand ambition of recognising and articulating the nature of conflict and its relationship to citizenship. Its *prima facie* public was determined by virtue of its incubators i.e the above mentioned civil society organisations; they were to be diverse young people from a cross section of society. Additionally, it was morally charged to remain embedded in its locale, not as a voyeur or a gentrifying force that pulled in discursive enquiry from the other side of the city but as an empathic neighbour.

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part of my final thesis project at Srishti School of Art, Design & Technology and set up with the support of the above organisations.



How does one begin to construct a museum without conquest? Or without the reenactment of violence or victimhood for the consumption of a visitor? How does a museum *become* before a collection does? How does one re-imagine the very category of the museum while retaining its ramifications? The only possibility of attempting these questions came from the inherent ability of space to be able to be a sensorial experience. It is possible that this kind of audacity was available to me since I arrived at the museum from design thinking which upholds prototype within the realm of praxis as the foremost way of knowing followed by iteration as a method, I assume it would be difficult to make gaping mistakes and rectify them if I arrived at it through the curatorial or historical first. It meant that operationally the museum's primary role was to listen, to its neighbourhood, to its participants, to its public.

Within the museum building several installations were setup in a non-linear format, to be accessed in no particular order, although the order chosen would effect the experience, each beseeching the visitor to transform their position from a viewer into that of a participant. It meant that the museum would come into being only when a visitor lent their participation through the adding or taking away to the museum. The Memory Lab, is one such example where a wall of empty transparent glass jars are stacked in open cabinets with blank labels, in the corner is a brief that asks visitors to leave behind objects that best speak of conflict in their personal lives and write its label. The Memory Lab traversed a time of emptiness to being an active archive of mnemonic artefacts over the years, the jars mostly have everyday objects, from broken bangles to cigarette boxes to coins to letters. Each private, each an attempt to construct an impression of conflict as real and personal, no longer stretched out in exercises of constructing the other but interrogating the self. Similarly, the Sorry Tree that arrives towards the end of the experience in the museum becomes a site for closure of a volatile hour spent in the museum. The act of apologising has political currency; it has also been a repetitive trope in the religious practice of several communities in Gujarat although reserved for the day of ritual only. The little notes that read 'I am Sorry' in 3 languages are tied to the Peepal tree caving into the balcony, many visitors leave personal notes



*Young visitor views an exhibition at the Conflictorium,  
Photograph by Sudharak Olwe*

on the flip side. These are temporal artefacts, they are tied, they fade, they fall off. The careful preservation of these notes is not undertaken; the everyday permeates the museum and positions itself as the same, it is operationally treated as the same. But the performative act of apologising is what remains, it enters the repertoire of the body politic of the city. It designates a space to record that apology has been due, the museum witnesses the transformation of memory into evidence.

The museum is divided into two parts, the conceptually fixed galleries that offer a lens by which conflict is framed through its relationship with citizenship and the temporary or rotating galleries, where conflict is explored thematically through visual art, performance, film or text. To avail silences or white walls in the museum are difficult, at no point can aural or ocular epiphanies arrive by selective disattention. The

realities of a wedding procession or call to prayer or a loud domestic quarrel are an integral sonic experience of viewing anything on display. The museum does not come to afford an independent interiority, it is informed always by its exterior counterpart.

Within the rotating exhibit lies the possibility of expanding the notion of the artefact. Let us take for example ‘Ambedkarite Shahirs from Maharashtra: Seeing the Dalit Movement through Songs’ curated by Yogesh Maitreya opened in March 2019 used listening devices like a harmonium or a stereo or a telephone to create a sphere that could trace the trajectories of Ambedkarite *shahiris* that have consolidated the spirit and vision of Ambedkar’s caste-less society. This exhibition and others are not informed by predominant conventions of display, glass boxes, yellow lines or labels but invite its audience to form their own unique etiquette of engagement.

Microsubversions Playbook is another example of active archive building of everyday subversions highlighted by artist work. This exhibition opened in January 2018 showcasing work that claimed attention towards workers lives through wood block slippers in Birender Yadav’s work, the sanitary napkins with silk thread and crystals in Sarah Naqvi’s work, a daily evening scene after work outside the textile industries of Bangalore by G. Mahesh or that of Ranjeeta Kumari who uses materials from workers’ surroundings to build head loads. Each of these works are embedded in an everydayness, each of these works emanate from the personal positions and ecosystems of these artists. They are not speaking for but speaking from— this is where the artefact rests, in the simultaneity of contemporary and historical time at once. The role of the museum as generating knowledge is not static but may take place over many days, each thematic is an ongoing enquiry and thus the artefact is often followed by a performance, one may detach the maker from the artefact but not a performer from the performance.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage”, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles (1998).



*Conflictorium, Photograph by Tathya Macwan*

Owing to an earlier observation, that the city had been engulfed in a culture of silence, it wouldn't be adequate to be a museum within the constraints of a building, it meant that the museum had to demonstrate historical thinking in a way that the city could be cognisant of the value of an evidence building practice. It meant that the scale at which the museum operationalises cultural practice had to be human. It had to demonstrate that it takes a small room of listeners in a museum for speakers to recount the testimonies of violence in Kashmir; for this to be evidence enough for a culture to reinvestigate its received normative narratives. It required only a few people to recognise that historical narratives are not the lone prerogative of the State; a transference of this consciousness to many small spaces and informal collectives engaging in culture practice, is in miniscule ways shifting the onus of producing evidence on the citizenry and not the survivor alone. It is in the effacing of the spectacle of the violence that one may retain our citizenship and the relevance of the museum; 'to know a history only through the spectacle is like knowing a culture only through vacation' argues Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998).

Conflictorium is a museum on the path of *becoming*; it may remain in a continual strife of articulating its practice and claiming the nomenclature of the museum, each changed by the other. Within this struggle, it hopes to identify most essentially its galleries and buildings, its artefacts and methods, its archives and histories, its evidence and culture, its participants and people as thriving ecologies of care, with a conviction that that it is practices of care that restore justice.

Naman P. Ahuja

## Museums Sail Another Ocean of the Sea of Stories

‘Musings’ may be a better derivate of [the] ‘Muses’ that was used for the nomenclature of the institution that is the ‘museum’. The Indian language terms (like *sangrahālaya*: store keeping or house of gathering / collection and *ajāibghar*: house of curiosities) that translate ‘museum’ have always fallen short of what museums do best: tell, and allow their viewers to *build stories*. This essay maps how a refurbishment of the idea that museums are all about the narratives they put out, will look in the future. We can call those narratives histories when we go to museums of art and archaeology, which is the field I focus on, or we can call them ethnographies in museums of folk cultures or crafts, oral histories in museums of modern and contemporary culture, subject specialised learning on entomology or taxonomies of birds or other animals at museums of natural history, learning modules on design (graphic, industrial, product, furniture....), the possibilities are endless, all depending on what type of museum we visit. All of these museums are dependent on communicating their own stories based on researching and then artfully sequencing their collections in ways which will engage the public. This was as important in pre-digital times, (even though several museums paid inadequate heed to this function, reducing themselves to being mere storehouses or places of curiosity), but now, with the world of digital media communication, this function is needed all the more.

Visitors, audiences, curators come up with diverse narratives. This essay responds to the requirement for decolonisation. Decolonisation may be more relevant in some (colonising) countries, but other issues are now more important in formerly colonised states. Post-colonial Indian concerns such as the erosion of vast habitats of forests, animals and people, atrocities of gender, communalism, casteism, the disregard for labour and marginalisation of various kinds are perhaps more pressing

matters than can be addressed by the ‘decolonisation’ narrative. Yet, without addressing decolonisation in Western education and museums, a wound is left open and a ground for equitable sharing cannot be achieved. The backlash that western museums face periodically brings them infamy on account of changing social perception. The courage to bring these narratives forward will keep the museum at the vanguard of knowledge. The starting point for this essay is the double-bind museums find themselves in: how will they protect the voices that bring them infamy, because even infamy is more acceptable than irrelevance.

Big, ‘universal’ museums have to cater to many different constituencies of interest groups. Selling stories to them is reliant on communication skills, knowing what narratives audiences require, yet reliant, above all, on research of the collections housed in a museum. The stories around objects are what make them relevant. Many discourses that have been uncomfortable for the establishment have gained enough ground for them to no longer be ignored by the museum. Maintaining relevance for the objects housed in the institution is as important as maintaining the collection itself. It is this requirement: for narratives that hold relevance, that is of concern in this essay, which is divided into three parts.

## 1.

Telling history is always done from someone’s perspective of the evidence. In times when audiences were more homogenous—bourgeois, and mostly of one ethnicity—this requirement was fulfilled more easily. These narratives have been heavily critiqued in a post-colonial, feminist, globalised world, and yet museums of history (and especially those that house antiquities) find themselves in a difficult position to alter their narratives and maintain relevance. The challenge global audience participation poses to museums is about who owns history? Is it the victor / powerful as used to be the case, or will narratives shift focus to the stories of those who wish to visit the museum, those who may once have been vanquished in order that their objects be used to fill that very institution called the ‘museum’? (Figure 1) In such a case, which is becoming evident all around us already, museums also have



*Figure 1: An installation at the CSMVS, Mumbai in the exhibition 'India and the World' for which the British Museum lent 123 objects that were displayed alongside an equal number from partnering Indian museums.*

*This photo shows:*

*'Two Girls', By Amrita Sher-Gil, Oil on canvas, 1939  
Budapest, Hungary. H: 158 cm, W: 90 cm, Private Collection*

*And*

*Queen Victoria, Wood, AD 1875-1900, Nigeria  
H: 37 cm, W: 12 cm, D: 14 cm, The British Museum (Af1988,12.1)  
Photo © Naman P. Ahuja, 2017*

*The umbrella term 'decolonisation' has come to stand for a wide array of requirements including shifts in the presentation of knowledge and ownership of artefacts. Juxtaposing *Two Girls* by Amrita Sher-Gil with a wooden statuette of *Queen Victoria* from Nigeria served to reflect on how colonisation and the subsequent globalisation have made narratives of ownership of knowledge, property and even identity no longer associated with a single territory.*

*Two Girls* by Sher-Gil, a pioneering mixed race Modernist, deals with questions of freedom, equality and identity in a globalised world, as it was painted during the momentous period of the rise of fascism in Europe, and that of nationalism in India. This work has always cast a complex shadow, both literally and figuratively that is filled here by the African *Queen Victoria*, carved out of wood. Statues of colonial domination, such as those of *Queen Victoria* were emplaced across the world in the countries that came under the British Empire. However the Nigerian artist has interpreted her here as a Yoruba carving.



to hire personnel of diverse ethnicities to speak for the many histories they comprise. Yet their goal of bringing discursive equality to the collections that share the same space is not achieved. The depth of available research on their cultures is overwhelming for western publics, and the level of the official storyline then falls back to old clichés of something exotic, marvellous or dexterous, and steeped in religion. All too often, these many ‘others’ find themselves stereotyped, forced to play a role circumscribed by the present agendas of history set by the establishment, or merely there as tokenism. Sometimes, these ‘other’ voices may be uncomfortable. Without allowing the museum to fulfil its role of bringing greater awareness to the public, its many other cultures remain trapped by their stereotypes.

But many times, it is because the kinds of objects that are necessary to tell their complex histories are not available in western museums that were collecting with an eighteenth or nineteenth century mind-set. Or, those histories may not even have objects to speak for them. Take the so-called “Vedic Age” for instance. Sherds of Painted Grey Ware and Black and Red Ware and Northern Black Polished Ware cut a most unglamorous display for the period from 1900 – 800 BC to showcase the world’s oldest Sanskrit language texts. Yet audio-visuals of chanting priests permit an invaluable oral history garnered using all manner of ethno-archaeological caution. Oral histories and the recitation of literature of old, bring other things into the narrative that objects foreclosed. This opens the museum repository up in unprecedented ways.

Testimonies challenge the narratives of history and with that, the museum has to alter the ways in which history is learnt. Chronology, which is the spine of the history museum, has tended to present its narratives with an idea of progress that could be shown through material artefacts that have been coupled with a growth of logic and reason. These narratives prioritised organised religion, industrialisation and urbanisation over pastoralism, homesteads and nomadism. These latter forms are inconvenient for a progressive West of course, but also in India where the exclusion and even invisibilization of vast populations has been done by establishments in the past, as it is even now. Indian

history is replete with stories of the extermination of those wandering monks who questioned and even forsook society, called *śramaṇa-s* as well as the habitats of *āṭavika-s*, the dwellers of forests. The power of their position was one which rejected materiality, wealth and objects and learnt to live by and make do with less. Not only do their histories go against the grain of the Enlightenment and the society that has championed the museum, it also leads to a more fundamental problem of how, possibly, can a museum showcase those civilisations that do not leave material traces. Museums, after all, house things that have withstood the natural course of the depredations of time, things that mark man's conquest of nature, our mass burials, our garbage and our profligacy—which are markers also of our achievements. Except, now it is easier and even necessary to allow objects to be categorised differently. And museums as we all know, thrive on taxonomies: categories of specimens grouped together, symptomatic of a culture, a defining paradigm.

Categories of classical, renaissance and modern, high and low, folk and popular have already been destabilized by researches that have shown that 'but this,' 'and that' cannot be dismissed. Now no canon remains watertight as narratives that show the many others that went alongside have gained almost as much currency. Sharing a common roof in a museum lie such disparate objects, that researchers and curators will have to work much harder to build the arcs that can allow them to coexist in the same space. When asked to draft my concept note for an exhibition of world history that was staged in India 2017,<sup>1</sup> I tried to

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<sup>1</sup> *India and the World: A History in Nine Stories*, a collaboration between the British Museum, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya and National Museum, Delhi, 2017. The exhibition showcased approximately 225 objects and was accompanied by a catalogue: *India and the World: A History in Nine Stories*, Delhi: Penguin, 2017. A podcast, Naman Ahuja in conversation with Jim Cuno is available on various online platforms including: <http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/india-the-world-with-curator-naman-ahuja/>

A synoptic film of the exhibition is available on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeZzU\\_0gnmY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeZzU_0gnmY),

alert my collaborators at the British Museum and in Indian museums that what history means, or what traces epitomise a civilisation can be very different in nature and can reveal very different priorities. I wrote,

“At the very outset, it must be understood that the intellectual basis for exhibitions on globalisation or world art, thinking about art from the perspective of a universal museum, and indeed, the even larger enterprise of thinking about the discipline of history from a post-Enlightenment and post-Hegelian perspective does not find easy acceptance or application in non-western cultures. This exhibition needs to state, in simple terms, how it is choosing to define the term ‘history’ and the term ‘world art’. We must recall that the mere act of historical, chronological comparison may itself be perceived as a western, Hegelian way of approaching a subject. This approach is one that must be adopted with caveats. Different parts of the world view the very concept and idea of history and historical time differently. India has famously used ways to bring back memory and cyclical time in innovative ways, even as it has progressed through linear time. Such an appreciation would have to undergird any exhibition that seeks to examine India and the world through history.”

Given that objects valued by one community do not have the same significance in another, the curatorial endeavour of displaying similar / like-for-like objects ran the risk of comparing apples and oranges. Yet, the parallel requirement was to promote harmony in a globalised world, to be able to see that we are all the same; humans all have similar concerns and expressions – we *must* see our commonalities. This enforcement of a narrative (or building those arcs as I just said above) could not be borne out easily – there were no objects on the *same* theme from *all* parts of the world that were made at precisely the *same* time to enable such a teleology. Audiences thus had to be presented with a demanding (or at least disturbing) display, instead, of counterpoints to the narrative of every gallery within each gallery. And we even went as far as having a final gallery to an exhibition that questioned the premise of the whole exhibition. (Figure 2).



*Figure 2: Rahu, the consumer of time*  
Gouache on paper, Pahari, AD 1720–50, Nurpur, Himachal Pradesh, India  
Height: 14.9 cm | Width: 10.16 cm  
Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh (2153)  
Image courtesy: Naman P. Ahuja

*Linear narratives of history can be challenged by thinking of time and progress from different perspectives.*

*Whatever be the stories we elect to highlight, the chronological nature of the history museum is itself arranged through time. But what if time is no longer thought of as being linear, how then do we communicate history or, any story for that matter? Some say time is cyclical, others say it spirals, and maybe it doesn't even exist in black holes. Can we use a different format of telling stories in fragments, of seeing the same history from different perspectives? I used a predictive Indian "tarot card" of Rahu to conclude the exhibition *India & the World* to reflect on, or invite the public to, deconstruct the curatorial act of the encapsulating a history of the world in just eight stories / galleries. Rahu, the one who swallows the sun and the moon, the very instruments of measuring time, causes chaos. The card was positioned in a manner that it allowed visitors to leave an exhibition with the question that whereas they had been shown some histories, there are, equally, priorities for stories from other perspectives that could also have been told.*

Showcasing how we are *different*, and how that difference should be respected, and thus lived with, becomes a more real way for the future, when multiple perspectives will each demand space.

Some tangible example may help demonstrate this better. We achieved a counterpoint to a gallery celebrating the First Cities, by showing bronze objects that have come from forested lands of communities which did not subscribe to urbanisation. In a gallery on military might and an age of Empires we used a remarkable sculpture which showed Siddhartha's rejection of his princely turban departing from a militaristic society that celebrated power and materiality to show a parallel ideal also existed; and given how widespread the Buddhist orders became at this time, this was obviously a major parallel narrative. The gallery that used a display of coins to show how State and Faith are invariably connected, was disturbed through a study of the history of Chinese money which did not take on religious imagery like much of the rest of the world. While a gallery of Court Cultures celebrated deluxe objects, we managed, equally, to use the objects to talk about the instruments of patriarchy. (Figures 3a, 3b)

And finally, the narrative of the last gallery Time Unbound questioned the entire notion of the linear presentation of history which undergirded the whole exhibition. Difference, and a disturbance of the neatly packaged 'history of the world' as seen in a hundred objects in London was after all inevitable when looked at from India and by Indians. A shift in focus does not come about only because of globalisation and different nationalities coming to museums but for many other reasons too: sexuality, language, social status or now, because of planetary precarity.

Climate change has served a death knell to the celebration of those notions of 'progress' in history that have championed urbanisation, industrialisation, and capitalism. The wisdom of those who learnt to make do with less, and hold on to knowledge systems without material backing, self-reliance and minimal waste, today are champions of carbon neutrality whose ethics of reuse without seeking to replace, discard and leave massive footprints behind them, can, and must, be



*Figure 3a: Copy of a Ming hand-scroll showing the occupations of court ladies*

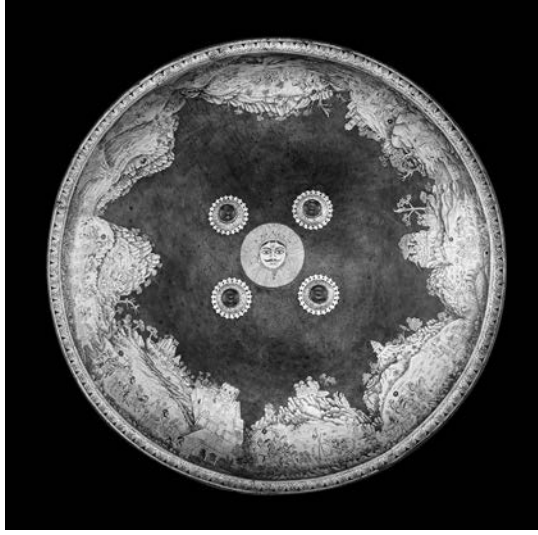
*Silk, about AD 1644–1911, China*

*Height: 33 cm, The British Museum (1902,0606,0.38)*

*Image courtesy: Naman P. Ahuja*

showcased alongside the many marvellous objects that fill a museum conventionally. With all the voices that now disturb the canon, we have to ask if those objects will still seem quite so marvellous, however? Can the museums still maintain their relevance?

While walking through a museum, we walk through a past that surrounds us with its testimonies, as much of humankind's extraordinary progress, as they are testimonies of its most deprived and sorrowful histories. Colonialism and subsequent globalization have ensured objects with different origins in time and space end up in the museum and share the same temporal mode – a frozen, accidental synchronicity – the present disguised as a form of immortality bestowed especially by the museum. Everything is present simultaneously: the trophies, the colonised, the marginalised, the martyrs and the prisoners all, speaking in what is often, the house of the victor. Dead things that once had a life, find articulation again. What was supposed to vanish is now forever present in a mode of in-between: neither dead nor alive, thanks to a narrative provided to it with a distance of history. Eternity then can be achieved at the cost of being dead, forever.



*Fig. 3b: Shield (dhal) of Maharana Sangram Singh*  
*Rhino hide*  
*Mewar, about AD 1730*  
*Udaipur, Rajasthan, India*  
*Height: 9.7 cm | Diameter: 62.5 cm*  
*National Museum, New Delhi (62.2879)*  
*Image courtesy: Naman P. Ahuja*

*These two objects, both from royal contexts, were also juxtaposed to reflect on how patriarchal stereotypes were reinforced through the art of the time.*

*The very masculine ceremonial shield of Maharana Sangram Singh of Udaipur is made of rhino hide, an animal that has been hunted to extinction in Rajasthan. Painted in shades of gold it depicts the Maharana in ‘manly’ royal pursuits such as archery and hunting, spying on a bathing woman, even as the ladies of his court are shown expectantly awaiting his arrival, in what appears to be their chief preoccupation. The Ming scroll, similarly, shows idealised portrayal of women in Chinese courtly life: tending to, and contained within walled gardens, playing musical instruments, dancing, writing, having their portraits made and playing games—all thought to be activities befitting of women. Not only do these objects reveal stereotypical mindsets of patriarchal societies, but because royal and courtly culture was widely emulated, it also signalled that this etiquette was seen as aspirational for the society at large, thereby further propagating such attitudes.*

What lives on through museums then, are a variety of narratives, not just objects. The written or audio-visual communication intersperses the collection of objects like a binding glue lending them relevance as well as vice versa: where the objects intersperse a historical narrative. The museum of the future will have to contend with the rising potential of these fragments of texts, oral testimonies and the silences between those fragments: how will they be preserved and showcased? Will ethics guard their protection, or will they be blocked because of rights of ownership over the publishing, disseminating, or transporting medium? Will histories and voices continue to remain suppressed? A perspective of thinking about the museum and its narratives through the more ethical discipline of social design provides us a methodological frame for approaching communication and media studies. It also opens up a way to think about the language and images that have metaphors to transport or engage the public.

## 2.

Many types of things, or matter, inventoried in the ethnological archive, are germane to history: oral testimonies, for instance, which provide as much evidence as objects did in a history museum. The digital platform makes available vast libraries of old, alongside a quantum rise in many more narratives for museums. The museum will thus have to grow to being a caretaker and store of stories. The museum of the future will also have to mine and excavate digital data to get a sense of the 20th and 21st centuries: music, personal records, exchanges, visuals and moving images—are all now largely digital, and so much of what is digital is exceptionally fragile. Lost hard-drives, forgotten passwords for data that has not been migrated to newer platforms, unavailability of hardware to retrieve the data; all translating to a whole new definition of ‘conservation’, which will require mastery over computer softwares, fixing of hardware – celluloid, videotape, cassette tapes, floppy disks, chips, and optics of decades back. Thus curation apart, museum and library conservation open into new arenas.



Anyone who has *access* to the technology / medium of being able to put out a narrative can make a claim to be heard. However, as we have seen over the past decade, the trend is to drown out their voices by those who *own* the technology / medium to put out a narrative. The effect of a dominant discourse can be hegemonic, fascist, seemingly convincing. And yet, with persistent regularity there is the ever-present voice of those who dared think of narratives that mattered to them personally, but were shared, followed and subscribed to, by a number significant enough to constantly challenge the dominant narrative. So to survive the demands of this requirement for staying relevant to these many demanding voices, we will have to have institutions that are willing to back the narrators they rely on—even when the narration is of a position that is contrary to the establishment, even when the establishment has to pay to have narratives that are critical of it—as long as the basis of the narrative is based on research and serves the demands of an appreciable audience. (Figure 4)

These narratives make a case for shaping identities as much as objects do / did and will demand their space in the museum alright, but they also open another can of worms: can they be owned or copyrighted? The laws on sharing uploaded data have to be thought through in a globalized world. Can the medium for the expression of a narrative—owners of the online collections databases, or Wikipedia, Microsoft or Google, and other tools and repositories—be made to repatriate to individual claimants? Will the usurping and ownership of knowledge present foreseeable problems for the museum? Will old battles of repatriation set the basis for the claims for the capacity to showcase more recent history as well? Who will represent claims—a person governed by the laws implemented by their country? How sustainable are a country's claims to ownership of narratives?

The question of how decolonisation has been dealt with cannot be dismissed as being *passé* in this respect. The absence of dealing with this narrative head-on publicly has allowed the matter to fester and the rioting protests in 2020 that have seen the tearing down of statues in public spaces and demands for the renaming of cities named after slave



Figure 5: Coronation Park, Raqs Media Collective, 2015  
Image courtesy: Naman P. Ahuja

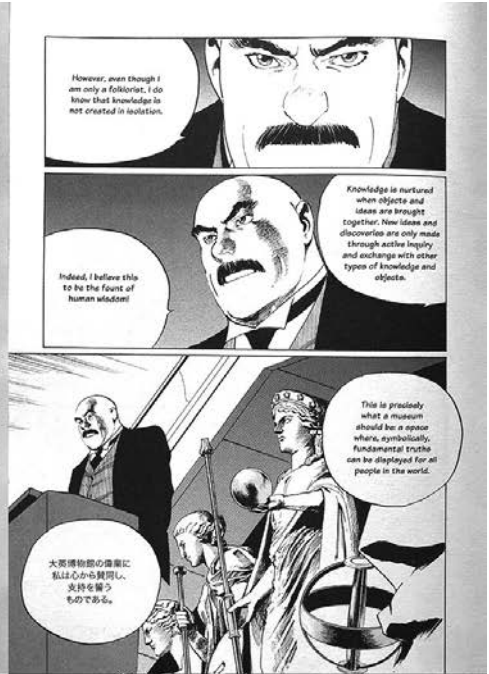
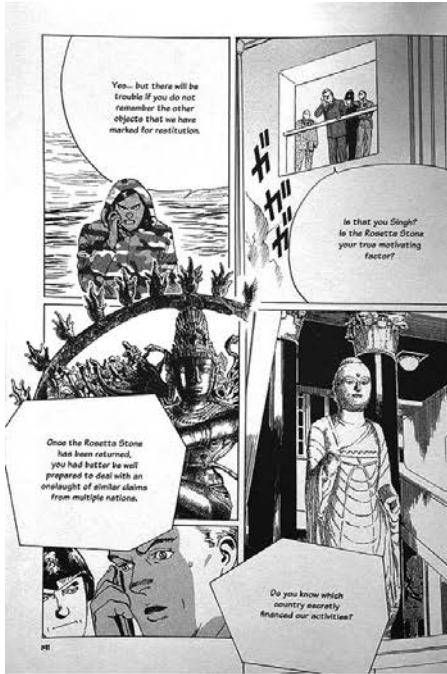
*The public removal of statues and their defacement has become topical again. This action, however, has as long a history as the making of images itself. The driving force behind iconoclasm is the power images have to make statements of how an older power lies superseded. After Independence in 1947, the various grand statues of British royals, viceroys, governors and other grandees in Bombay were packed off and put in the Byculla zoo. The ones in Delhi were dumped in Coronation Park, where Raqs, the art and media collective created artworks inspired by them for exhibition.*

*Coronation Park in north-east Delhi is where the ‘Delhi Durbar’ of 1911 was held by the British in what was the greatest exhibition of their imperial power in which Indian princes and elites each came one by one to salute the British King Emperor. During the (Okwui Enwezor curated) Biennale at Venice, in 2015, Raqs Media Collective’s work lined the avenues of the Giardini with a procession of statuary inspired by these neglected, broken vestiges of those that were once all powerful. To them, Coronation Park stands “as a reminder of the Ozymandian hubris at the heart of all forms of power, including the ones that thought that the sun would never set on them.” The relevance or storyline of the artwork by Raqs was that of the transience of and shifts in power that the breakage, removal or neglect of statues communicate.*

traders and colonisers to make society see that “Black Lives Matter” is only symptomatic of the fact that narratives which needed to be widely disseminated decades back, were not. Similarly, a sensible approach to allow for the safety of the objects in their collections, museums needed to do more with their narratives by which they came to own their objects as well as the richer cultural histories they can now enable. (Figure 5) Without publicising the standards of narrative and display afforded to them today, the museum allows itself to be questioned on its right to own the objects. At the risk of being repetitive, doing right by a collection has to be worth more than merely looking after it physically, a museum also has to reveal that the collection is relevant.

Ownership then, takes us not just to the matter of owning objects, but the claim made on owning the research and the narratives surrounding, or enabled by the objects. The ownership of the physical object, and the space to express the narratives it enables may be under the care of one institution, which does not naturally lend ownership of the creative agency and labour the production of the varied narratives around it. This brings greater attention to the narrator, researcher, curator and writer—our *vidyādhara* (Sanskrit for knowledge-bearer, usually shown as a morphed being, aerial and terrestrial). The possibility to check for plagiarism and the migration of phrases digitally, completely changes the old predicament where ideas of one scholar are pirated and communicated better by a bigger publisher or museum as sources can be traced with a digital trail. It would be a mistake to imagine that the fast attention-grabbing platform of short-texts made to service a modern reader will end the requirement for rigorous citations. To the contrary, the digital makes citationality that much more accessible, and alongside the encouragement to the process of research and history writing, museums will have to take responsibility for what they state. There are thus many aspects of the administration and management of history that will continue to disturb any museum that does not have the autonomy to defend its claim to relevance.

In a time of planetary precarity, the very existence of museums is being called into question. We are also considering a very real possibility



when objects will have to be locked away for safety because of all kinds of threats—social and climatic; or because the threats are to the people who visit and work in those museums. History and heritage will then have to rely on being shared through means other than a physical or real perusal of artefacts. The virtual, however, is even more reliant on words, for it is the storylines that people search for to inform them about objects. It is the courage to express these narratives that will keep the museum and its objects relevant.

*Left page: Figure 4: Pages from Professor Munakata's British Museum Adventure*

*By Hoshino Yukinobu*

*Published by the British Museum in 2011.*

*Image courtesy: Naman P. Ahuja*

*Professor Munakata's British Museum Adventure was a Manga published in 2011 by the British Museum. Mangas often take on difficult subjects in a beguiling comic-book format and this one presented a forthright statement on the position of the British Museum on repatriation and decolonisation. Professor Munakata, is a scholar from Britain's WWII rival, Japan. He saves the BM from a militant Indian wanting revenge in the absence of restitution, repatriation or at least some reparation for the loss of India's material wealth and cultural assets. Addis Singh is in cahoots with Laura Nielson, the French descendant of those who were "wronged" in colonial profiteering in the Napoleonic Anglo-French wars, a symbol of which was the take over of the Rosetta Stone, key to the world's languages, from Napoleon by George III and housed for public display at the BM as its greatest treasure. The story acknowledges that two sets of old colonial thieves may still be fighting over their loot. At the end of the narrative, the BM is shown to uphold the claim to shaping knowledge for public good of all nations as its duty. However it does not render itself to be accountable to that claim. The narrative is however humanised in its conclusion, where legacies of loot are contrasted with the obsession of curators who wish to serve the collections and shape knowledge.*

## CONCLUSION

What does a museum's future auger as the institution sets sail upon an Ocean of Stories: the Kathāsaritsāgara? In language pithy and quick, a *paiśācya* pentameter if you will, curators or narrators like some celestial *vidyādhara* must beckon their publics plural. Delivering each cliff-hanger with *vismaya* and *āścayra*—wonder and curiosity, and heighten these *rasa*-s with bejewelled illustrations of artfully presented objects. We may not have access to the real object, but we will get an *ābhāsa*, its verisimilitude, a semblance. We may not even *have* any objects anymore, to give us true, experiential knowledge or *jñāna*, but there will be stories inspiring audiences by the ingenious labour of humankind. The growth of stories within stories portend a cacophonous universal chaos with each *vidyādhara* using the ensnaring tools at their disposal to make themselves and their stories distinct. The flood and fires may remove all matter and material, but somewhere in the ether, the energy of their many stories will survive.

## POST SCRIPT: A GLOSS

Have narrators or historians in India's past confronted these questions and what solutions have they devised? As a post-script to this essay I would like to draw attention to a few metaphors and contrivances employed by ancient Indian narrators. Knowing full well that what was material was only ephemeral; they too were confronted by a requirement to tell their testimonies in ways that would not be easily erased. They did this by wrapping history in myth, and realising, equally, that the most important teachings can be communicated as fables. This essay's title, plays on the title of a medieval Indian epic called the Kathāsaritsāgara, which literally means an ocean enriched with stories.

The Kathāsaritsāgara was written in the 11th century by Somadeva in easy, but memorable verse, composed in a pentameter which is itself called *paiśācya*! *Paiśācya* means 'of the piśācas' – piśācas being denizens of purgatory or the nether world. Semi-divine creatures who live in these in-between realms in Indian mythology are seen as agents of

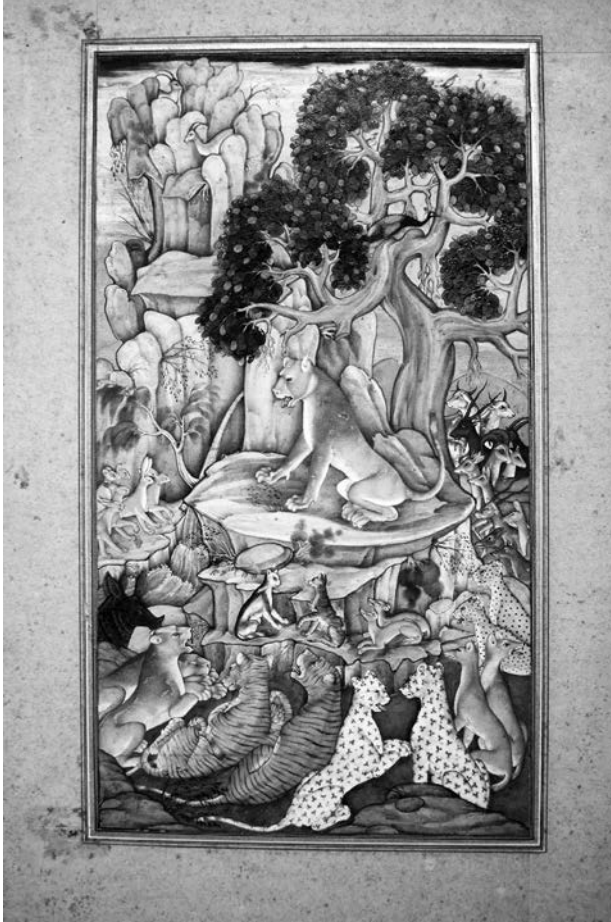


transformation, who transport humans from one realm to another, both literally, and mentally. They include *vidyā-dharas*, bearers of knowledge, for knowledge transforms a person. Their ‘*paiśācyā*’ verses for children (and grown-ups), thus rhyme in the cautionary meter of the inevitable fate or judgement that burns its imprint on the mind in the formative early years. Its stories are often concerned with dealing with those not as skilled, rich, and force the listener to contend with questions of scruples and ethics—an engagement with othering.

The Kathāsaritsāgara contains marvellous fables, which are closely allied to other sets of fables all over the world. Their study forms an extraordinary web that has given children the world over their lessons in ethics, morals and even been used as an educational tool—in Arabia, as *Kalila wa Dimna* (*Calila e Dimna* in Castilian) and in Persian as the *Anwār i-Sohaylī*. In Europe, Grimm catalogued many such fables, and found some went as far back as Aesop. (Figure 6) Aesop—probably an Ethiopian or from the Near East, wrote in Greek. There are always stories behind stories after all—histories each.

The Kathasarisagara Kathāsaritsāgara also claims that it derives from the much older *Bṛhatkathā*, which is now lost to us. In its basic form and construction, this is related to the Buddhist *Jātakas* (containing stories of the previous births of the Buddha) and the Brahmanical *Pañcatantra* stories. No one is clear as to what came first: their recension in the Brahmanical context or a Buddhist one. The material culture that each of these stories was built around has not survived, but the stories themselves continue to condition and educate even today. And even today they provide a story for globalisation: they provide us with our vocabulary of what we regard as our mother-tongues and language, what we value, how we behave. These, then, are narratives that have reach.

The second conceptual framework that I presume this essay (and this book itself) plays with, is on the definition of not just what is history but what is it that the historian does. Every history is written as an interpretation of the past, to make it relevant to each present. However the invitation to contribute to this volume is also a provocation, where



*Figure 6: The lion king's mother helps her son, by addressing the other families of the jungle.*

*A folio from the Iyar i Danish, painted by Farrukh Chela for the Emperor Akbar at Lahore in 1596, in the collection of the Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi: (Acc. No.9069/6); Photograph: Naman P. Ahuja, 2012.*

*The lion king, called Pinglak in the Sanskrit Panchatantra killed the faithful ox Shanzabah (Sanjeewak in Sanskrit) based on the disinformation generated by his minister Damnah (Dammak in Sanskrit). Moreover, so clever and eloquent was the evil Damnah, that the king was unable to reprimand him. The Queen Mother, then, who knew the truth and would not be beguiled, took matters into her own hand, and addressed the court and through counter espionage, exposed the truth.*



as an art historian who looks at the past, one is being invited here to write about the future. As T.S. Elliot once said,

“Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.”

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

This idea was obviously well understood by the historians from India’s past who wrote in a genre called *itihāsa*. One of the key *itihāsa* texts is contained in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa, a *circa* 3rd or 4th century AD mythological text in praise of the Hindu god Vishnu and is called the Vamśānucarita.

It discusses the various *manu*-s who ruled in remote antiquity. Who is a *manu*? Akin to an Adam or Noah, every age has had its *manu*, and most medieval royal families in *itihāsa* trace their genealogy to a *manu*. The text lists these in past tense. But, subsequently, the text changes from the past to the future tense and claims to predict the events which are described. These events, interestingly, correspond with the names

*These ancient animal fables have moved to every continent of the world and been translated into all major languages. They were used for the education of children right from ancient to the medieval times, whether in the older form Sanskrit as the Panchatantra, in Buddhism as the Jatakas, in Arabic as the Kalila wa Dimna or in Persian as the Anwār i-Sohaylī. In Europe Grimm catalogued many such fables, and found some went as far back as Aesop. Aesop—probably an Ethiopian or from the Near East, wrote in Greek. In another place, enslaved Africans took the moral tales as their literature. The texts have been through innumerable iterations, and it would not be an overstatement to say that no two versions are identical. It is the significance of the shifts in emphases that have kept these stories relevant for their new locations and audiences. In 1588 the emperor Akbar commissioned Abu’l-Faḥl to produce a concise version entitled ‘Tār-e dāneš, an illustration of which we see here. The significance of the text in imparting vocabulary, language and communication skills has been hailed by teachers for centuries. In fact, it was even used as a standard entrance examination text in the Indian Civil Service and the Indian Army during colonial times, before the Union Public Service Commission started downgrading the syllabus.*

of kings between the 4th century BC to the 4th century AD, which was the very period which the writers were witnessing in their present. Can this be indicative of the conceit of the Indian historian, the controller of the narrative? Does this reflect his awareness of the past, to shape a future? Does a museum do something similar: to bring, as Romila Thapar calls it, ‘The Past Before Us’? <sup>2</sup>

The *itihāsa* writer employs an extraordinary literary device wherein, he switches the tense of his text from past to future by locating himself somewhere in the middle between a mythic past and a documented/researched history. That which is in documentable time has been written in future tense, such that the historian has literally used the idea of how time past is contained in time future—rather like the requirement of this book on the Museum of the Future, which is being written by historians of the past. The past and present written predictively do not reduce the narrative only to mythology and science fiction, but allow the writer to capture a space that is outside of the confines of time, capable of being reinvented and repackaged for us in each historical time, and informed by the present in which the historian is located.

And finally, within the systems of Indian aesthetics which inform art history, are meditations on the role of art and literature: what do they do, how do they operate. One of those concepts is *ābhāsa*, mere appearance, not the real thing, but perfectly capable of transporting the person through this reflection of the real to deliver its *rasa*, or emotional taste. Wonder and curiosity (*vismaya* and *āścarya*) are not necessarily the highest of emotional states, but an essential means that need to exist in the first place to be receptive enough to be carried to all other conditions.

I have drawn on these three Indian genres since this essay is about these ideas: the importance of narrative for the sake of the object and the museum, the role of the narrator and the devices used for the narration—all, as I specified in the introduction, in the service of history. Combining them, I hazarded a conclusion in their vein.

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<sup>2</sup> Romila Thapar, *Cultural Pasts: Essays in early Indian history*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 166.

Parul Dave Mukherji

## Talking Brooms and Silent Statues: Making Way for Decolonising Museums

Using a broom is a great art. Where do you keep it? How do you use it? Which type of broom do you use for which type of surface? Does a man bend while using it or stay straight? ...All these questions must rise in the heart of an artist.

Mahatma Gandhi in a letter to Devi Prasad<sup>1</sup>

It may be simplistic to draw an arc from Gandhi's valorization of a broom in 1945 in his portrait of an ideal artist to Arvind Kejriwal's embrace of a broom as a political logo for his Aam Admi Party in 2013.<sup>2</sup> But it cannot be denied that the *jhadoo* or the broom emerges as a powerful allegory touching a raw nerve in the country's politics and cultural politics. Exploring its absence or presence in museums has the potential of laying open a repressed site in the critical discourse in art history and museum studies.

Museums in India, a legacy of European enlightenment and colonisation, are facing a crisis of irrelevance. Rather than arising out of lack of patronage and infrastructure, among the hurdles in framing relevant narratives, is an incomplete engagement with the challenge of decolonising the museum. If museums have to reinvent themselves for the

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Naman P. Ahuja for drawing my attention to M. K. Gandhi's letter to Devi Prasad. For facsimile and translation (by the same author) of this letter, see his "Craft as an Ideal" in *Indian Ceramics: History and Practice*, *Marg*, No. 2, vol. 69, 2017, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> Arvind Kejriwal is currently the Chief Minister of Delhi since February 2015 when his Aam Admi Party came to power. On 1st August, 2013, the Election Commission approved broom as an election symbol of the Party. The emblem stood not only for the dignity of labour but also the Party's aspiration to 'clean' Indian politics of corruption.

future, decolonising involves more than a rejection of colonial thinking and cultural nationalism. To think of a museum of the future is also to envisage “a modern *future* in which community may be imagined again.”<sup>3</sup> In India, as elsewhere, no imagination of this community can happen without a critical engagement with equality in aesthetic and political representations, a theme that an aesthetics or museumising of a broom potentially opens up.

It is precisely this kind of engagement with cultural and social equality — which may even pave the way for an emancipated spectator<sup>4</sup> to emerge — that underpins my bizarre juxtaposition between two exhibitions, a temporary show, *India and the World* that took place in Mumbai (2019) and a permanent ethnographic Arna Jharna: The Thar Desert museum (2003) near Jodhpur, Rajasthan. *India and the World* was a major transnational exhibition involving institutional collaboration between the British Museum, London and Indian museums, national and regional; it aimed to compel the spectators to rethink India’s role in world history and encompassed time from prehistory to the contemporary. On the other hand, the Arna Jharna museum was envisioned by Komal Kothari, a renowned folklorist and ethnomusicologist, who mooted the idea of devoting a museum fully to brooms. This museum was part of his wider project of contextualizing and humanizing “folk as people” as opposed to “folk as exhibition”.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, Verso, London, 1989, p. 35.

Here, modern future and its association with community is salient to my article and I want to insist by turning to Williams for a non-traditionalist sense of the community marking a departure from the model proposed by A. K. Coomaraswamy. The latter was one of the burdens of cultural nationalism and its retrograde politics.

<sup>4</sup> I draw the idea of the ‘emancipated spectator’ from the French thinker, Jacques Ranciere to question the oppositions that structure the nationalist and postcolonial debates in India around the citizen subject in terms of activity and passivity; individuality and community; ignorance and knowledge.

<sup>5</sup> Vishal Pratap Singh Deo, “The Oral Historian from Borunda: Komal Kothari,” *Sahapedia*,

The incongruity of the comparison may strike the reader as a “chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table,”<sup>6</sup> a Surrealist thought experiment that sought to bring on the same page two completely foreign realities to shake up an observer’s preconditioned perception of reality. Decolonisation needs a shock of this kind to upturn received knowledge. Its shock value comes from the fact that these two exhibitions allow us a juxtaposition of contrarian realities: The Mumbai show is all about the iconic statues and artefacts cherished and preserved in national museums whereas the museum in Jodhpur transforms the everyday brooms or *jhadoos* not just into collectibles and museological artefacts, but also as receptacles of contradictions, of purity and pollution and as “narrative objects” that unfold repressed stories about themselves.

Despite their insuperable differences, both the exhibitions belong to the 21st century shaped by conflicting conditions of globalization and nationalism on the one hand, and the primacy of the folk and the regional on the other. In this fraught landscape, whose equality is at stake – curators’, the publics’ or the institutions’?

Before we proceed further, we have to unpack what we mean by a critical engagement with cultural politics around equality, specially, when the two shows under consideration are so unequal. In the same vein, we have to clarify that decolonisation does not imply any purist return to some past native intellectual discourse, but rather a conceptual criss-crossing across different knowledge systems to get the sense of the contemporary. At the outset, I would propose a new model of critique that

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www.sahapedia.org ‘ the-oral-historian-borunda-komal-kothari. November 8, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Shane McCorristine, “Lautréamont and the Haunting of Surrealism.” The author refers to how André Breton, the founder of French Surrealism, was profoundly influenced by a French 19th-century poet, Comte de Lautréamont, specially to the poetic reference to a sewing machine and an umbrella, while reading his “Les Chants de Maldoror”, p. 34. *Collegium*, Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences 5. Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, 2009, pp. 31–49.



*Townley Discobolus under the Dome flanked by Hanuman and Flying Figure at the India and the World Exhibition, CSMVS, Mumbai, 2019, Photograph courtesy: Naman P. Abuja*



*Brooms for indoor spaces on display at Arna Jharna: The Thar Desert Museum, near Jodhpur, Rajasthan. Photograph courtesy: Rustom Bharucha/ Arna Jharna: The Thar Desert Museum*

works with a less anxious comparativism: take, as for example, my turn to “aesthetic equality” (AE). While Jacques Ranciere and Boris Groys proposed the concept within the European context, I take it as a provocation to think of its relevance in India. How does one rethink equal aesthetic rights in the present situation in India when the foundation of political equality enshrined in its Constitution is being eroded? This question has a past trajectory in the subcontinent with its long civilizational history of social inequality, a fact that the Constitution had to reckon with to safeguard the equality of its citizens.

There is yet another form of equality, which I term as discursive equality (DE), which might appear to be an elusive concept. It involves conflicts of interpretation across different frames and may be considered to be related with colonialism. Colonialism did not fulfil conditions of DE on the account of the unequal relationship between the knowledge systems of the colonisers and that of the colonised, a situation that did not get redressed fully even by the arrival of the postcolonial discourse. DE continues even today and in important ways underpins more recently invented and fraught binary terms like the global north and the global south. The frame of DE is particularly expedient while exploring the conceptual frames informing a transnational exhibition like the *India and the World* and its apparent redressal in the Arna Jharna museum.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the claims of discursive equality were built into most colonial theory which have shaped cultural nationalism in the 20th century even prior to Independence and continued well into the end of this century. The traditional terms ‘desi’ and ‘margi’ and their modern reuse is an example of the struggle of Indian art historians and art theorists to challenge Eurocentric frameworks. Given the complex nature of my

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<sup>7</sup> This frame of DE has been brought to bear by different Indian curators: Jyotindra Jain in the Crafts Museum and many shows curated by him, Rustom Bharucha and Komal Kothari at Arna Jharna and by Naman Ahuja. Latter’s intervention and the use of this frame is more clearly visible in his exhibitions such as *The Body in Indian Art* (2013) which was fully curated by him rather than in the co-curated *India and the World* (2018).

juxtaposition of the two exhibitions, let me spell out my conceptual moves involving three interrelated frames: of aesthetic equality, discursive equality and the category of ‘desi’ and ‘margi.’ The first, derived from Boris Groys and Jacques Ranciere, is taken as a provocation and a concept metaphor to explore inequality in various registers; the second one, discursive equality, being my own proposition is one such register to understand translatability across conceptual frames; and finally, the category of ‘desi’ and ‘margi’ drawn by modern ideologues and culture theorists from classical Sanskrit aesthetics to negotiate with the cultural and political inequality of their own times.

Let us unpack each of these frames. Take, as for instance, Groys’ proposition of aesthetic equality in the way it allows for the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics to confront one another. He connects AE with the concept of European avant-garde in a manner in which the question of social equality was transposed, as it were, on the equality of the media.

The art world should be seen as the socially codified manifestation of the fundamental equality between all visual forms, objects, and media. Only under this assumption of the fundamental aesthetic equality of all artworks can every value judgment, every exclusion or inclusion, be potentially recognized as a result of a heteronomous intrusion into the autonomous sphere of art—...<sup>8</sup>

When the French artist Marcel Duchamp, for example, created the “ready-mades”, (1913) <sup>9</sup> he asserted that any material or object from our daily world could qualify as a candidate for art and argued for a level playing ground for modern art. His famous *Fountain* (1917) in which Duchamp placed a urinal on a pedestal was perhaps aimed at flattening the hierarchies amongst different genres (still life, portrait, history painting, etc.) and materials (marble, wood, stone, clay, etc.)

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<sup>8</sup> Groys, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> What is often referred to as Duchamp's first readymade was his *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913, which was an upside-down bicycle wheel mounted upside on a draughtsman's stool. It was subsequently that the term “readymade” got coined.



enshrined by the art academies in one stroke. It was as if aesthetic or material equality which recognizes all media and material equal for a production of an artwork could work as an allegory for social equality.

What if aesthetic equality is taken up as a concept metaphor for exploring social and political inequality implicit in the terms ‘desi’ and ‘margi’ in the context of post-colonial art theory and two exhibitions in particular? In order to answer this question, the concept of discursive equality is useful in engaging with the cultural politics of the *India and the World* show. As the title suggests, this show dealt with art objects from different museums involving curators across the global south and global north. Their different locations and different frames of curating posed a challenge to discursive equality. Even if we grant aesthetic/historical equality to all objects in a show, in their bid to narrate a history of India in relation to the world, the exhibition reflects a double bind in the status of these objects that shift unevenly between ethnographic and aesthetic frames. This tension also surfaces in the Jodhpur museum dedicated to brooms with their undeniable association with utility and the ethnographic on the one hand and the museum’s need to raise the brooms stature worthy as objects of display on the other.

Similarly, the critical frame offered by the terms ‘desi’(local) and ‘margi’ (arguably global) seems relevant across both the exhibitions as it maps complex levels of hierarchies. Besides, these terms have a fascinating career in the history of modern art criticism. Their first use was inspired by A. K. Coomaraswamy whose cultural nationalism not only led him to devote immense attention to these ‘native’ terms<sup>10</sup> but more interestingly, he approached these traditional terms to illuminate current hierarchies between ‘high art’ and ‘popular art’ prev-

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<sup>10</sup> Though the term ‘desi’ was used first by Dhyanajaya (10th Century CE) in his *Daśarūpakam*, it was in Someśvara's *Mānasollāsa* (12th Century CE.), that ‘desi’ tradition is described briefly. A detailed description of ‘desi’ appeared in *Saṅgīta ratnākara* of Śārngadeva (13th Century CE). See for a detailed explanation on ‘desi’ tradition, Mandakranta Bose, *Movement and Mimesis: The Idea of Dance in the Sanskrit Tradition* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991) pp. 216- 55.

alent in his own times.<sup>11</sup> This compelled him not only to revisit the past but also betray his own caste and gender politics in the manner in which he constructed an axial relationship between ‘margi’ and ‘desi.’ ‘Margi’ gets associated in his scheme of things with the vertical/ hierarchical/ sacred/ spiritual/ male, and ‘desi’ with the horizontal/ profane/ female. His reading of the terms from classical Sanskrit sources betrays his own political unconscious in the manner in which he glosses over the inequalities institutionalized by the caste system calling it ‘a functional differentiation’ and a matter of *svadharma* or one’s own duty or duty ordained by the caste one is born into. Most problematic from the point of view of the concerns of this paper is the abiding effect of Coomaraswamy’s transcendental framework that portrayed traditional Indian society as an apolitical society. In fact, this led to systemic validation of separation of intellectual and manual labour which ended up validating the division of labour sanctified by the caste system. Notice his extraordinary take on literacy or education in traditional society:

Here the distinction of “educated” from “uneducated” is merely technical; it is no longer one of degrees of consciousness, but of more or less information. Under these conditions, the distinction of literacy from illiteracy has a value altogether different from its value in traditional societies in which the whole folk, at the same time that it is culturally unanimous, is *functionally differentiated* (my emphasis); literacy, in the latter case, being quite unnecessary... and, further, under these circumstances, the function itself (*svadharma*), however “menial” or “commercial,” is strictly speaking a “way” (*marga*), so that it is not by engaging with other work to which a higher or lower social prestige may attach, but to the extent that a man approaches perfection in his own work and understands its spiritual significance that he can rise *above himself* – ...<sup>12</sup>

By privileging “consciousness” over knowledge and claiming that the former is evenly distributed in the organic “unanimous” community in the past, he glossed over the feudal order that underlay the caste system and created a fake equality under the guise of organic national-

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<sup>11</sup> A. K. Coomaraswamy, ‘The Nature of “Folklore” and “Popular Art”’ in *Why Exhibit Works of Art?* (London: Luzac & Co., 1943) pp. 130-143.

<sup>12</sup> Coomaraswamy, p. 137.

ism. Even the distinction between 'margi' and 'desi' became meaningless in his final analysis.<sup>13</sup> In a footnote, Coomaraswamy spells out his body politics in organicist terms. The violence of culture is condoned via nature:

It need hardly be pointed out that a castle or a feudal organization of a society is no more a division in this sense than is the complex organization of the physical body the mark of a disintegrated personality.<sup>14</sup>

It is precisely this romanticized body politic of Coomaraswamy that is called into question by Raymond Williams' idea of community of the 'modern future' which I had alluded to as an entry point of this article. How does a culture theorist like Geeta Kapur who drew from Williams the very title of her influential book *When was Modernism* (1991) react to the categories of 'desi' and 'margi'?<sup>15</sup> Kapur, more than Coomaraswamy, tries to inject the political into the 'desi' and 'margi' divide but these terms inevitably get caught up in her contestation of the center-periphery discourse.

If one now asks why it is that we are not so preoccupied with the centre-periphery model (with its underpinning of the base-superstructure thesis) the answer is that perhaps it is because of the civilizational presumptions in our cultural discourse. Deriving from a highly developed metaphysic, this is an extensive and vastly hegemonic discourse. The civilizational legacy is also extremely sophisticated, using that term to mean, also a *pragmatic* style of operation (my emphasis). To give an example, there is the well known civilizational design whereby the high

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<sup>13</sup> Folklore is central to these claims and he in fact quoting an expert of old ballads, Francis James Child: As Professor Child has remarked in connection with the history of the ballads, "The condition of society in which a truly national and popular poetry appears ... (is one) in which the people are not divided by political organizations and book-culture into marked distinct classes; in which, consequently, there is such community of ideas and feelings that the whole people form one individual." Coomaraswamy, p. 136.

<sup>14</sup> Coomaraswamy, p. 142.

<sup>15</sup> Geeta Kapur, *When was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000). Kapur's key arguments were already worked out in an earlier article: "Place of the Modern in Indian Cultural Practice," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Dec 7, 1991, pp. 2803-2806.

or classical cultures that are extant relate with popular or vernacular cultures to form reciprocal patterns. I am referring to the categories of 'margi' and 'desi.' The design is in effect a fully developed theory for cultural integration.<sup>16</sup>

By taking 'desi' and 'margi' as exemplars of reciprocity between 'high or classical' and 'popular or vernacular' cultures, their potential to be read in political terms remains overlooked. Instead, Kapur's usage of these terms produces yet another binary between the national and the international/ global, in which 'margi' ends up being aligned with the high Indic civilizational legacy within her larger paradigm of the "national-modern". While such a framing<sup>17</sup> serves as a counter-discourse to challenge the dominance of the Western, metropolitan centre, it inadvertently results in the negation of the internal power structure.

Rather than engaging with the 'internal' centre-periphery model which would have illuminated the political dimension of 'desi' and 'margi,' Kapur seeks to relativize hegemony as 'ours' (nationalist, hence legitimate) and 'theirs' (internationalist/imperialist where the West as the centre and India as the periphery). While attempting to dismantle the centre-periphery model, the relativization inadvertently strengthens this model and the radical possibility of relating these aesthetic terms with larger social and cultural inequality foreclosed.

Perhaps, the best way to redress this oversight would be via a 'detour' to Gandhi and the social reformer, B. R. Ambedkar. This essay began with Gandhi's advice to a young artist about an artistic lesson to be learned from a broom. His advice did not imply any recourse to any *śāstra* (I doubt if the 'high' tradition ever thought about a *jhadoo śāstra* or a manual on brooms) but reflexivity of pure practice that Gandhi had been invested in. How do you theorize manual labour if you belong to a class which never had to hold a broom? Perhaps, the advice that Gandhi was giving to Devi Prasad could only have come from someone

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<sup>16</sup> Kapur, "Place of the Modern in Indian Cultural Practice," p. 2804.

<sup>17</sup> "A centre-periphery model where we are on the periphery even when this is recognized at one level of global reality does not easily coincide with the terms of cultural self-perception still current in India." (Ibid).

belonging to a privileged class, for whom the experience of using a broom could become an occasion to reflect on the division of manual labour and intellectual labour. In other words, Gandhi's almost poetic description of the skill required to clean the floor by a broom doubles up as an epiphany as if to heal the divide between intellect and the body. Can the centuries-long institutional separation of the two forms of labour be joined by an artist's act of sweeping the floor? Gandhi intended it to be preliminary lesson in praxis and an experiential way to close the gap between politics and aesthetics.

For Ambedkar, perhaps the use of the broom was not so much outside the horizon of his experience to become the source of deep introspection. He, on the other hand, evolved another method of shaping his critique of inequality by turning to the *Dharmaśāstras* (traditional codes of conduct for a [male] householder) and other 'sacred' texts which had over centuries institutionalized the caste system. It is in these early sources that Ambedkar confronts the same "vertical" man that Coomaraswamy had celebrated in his essay. It is in the *puruṣa sukta* of the Rg Veda that Ambedkar confronted the body politic of the upper castes.<sup>18</sup> *Puruṣa* or the primeval man in this text was imagined as the source of all the four castes; the head, shoulders and belly being the origin of the three upper castes (Brahmins/priests, Ksatriyas/ soldiers and Vaisyas/merchants) and the feet, of the *śūdras* or the lower caste. This figure, in the context of this article, perfectly embodies the allegory of the separation of intellect and manual labour along the vertical axis.

In fact, even a more pernicious representation of labour exists in *Manusmṛti*, an ancient law text that laid down the rules of normative social behavior of a householder. While Ambedkar had also turned to this text and further exposed its caste bias, its gender ramifications are also very pejorative. Let us pay a close attention to the use of a broom which is enlisted as one of the five sinful elements in a domestic space. Not only does it segregate intellectual (also to be understood as ritual labour) to be performed by the upper caste men from the menial labour

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<sup>18</sup> Sanjay Paswan and Pramanshi Jaideva, *Encyclopedia of Dalits in India Movements* (New Delhi: Kalpaz, 2002), p. 221.

associated with women and their prescribed domain in a kitchen but lays down purificatory rites for elite men who may accidentally commit the crime of physical labour:

*pañca sūnā grhasthasya cullī peṣanyupaskaraḥ|  
kaṇḍanī caudakumbhaśca badhyate yāstu vāhayan || 3.68 ||*

*For the householder there are five slaughter-houses: the hearth, the grinding-stone, household implements like a broom, etc., mortar and pestle and water-jar;—by using which he becomes stricken.<sup>19</sup>*

It makes apparent that the politics of labour involved both the coordinates of power- gender and caste and led to the institutionalized denigration of manual labour as the source of ritual impurity and thus created a relationship of mutual exteriority between manual labour and ritual labour.

It is against this wider history of the gendered casteist politics of labour that Gandhi's advice to the young Devi Prasad had a radical resonance: Gandhi advised the young male artist to experience labour of sweeping the floor reserved for low caste men and women. However, when it came to the artistic practice of drawing or sketching, Devi seems to have gestured towards the gender dynamics of labour: he went on to make a sketch of a woman in the act of sweeping the ground with a *jhadoo*, without clothes, and in the process inadvertently exposed the sweeper to our gaze. In fact, even the *jhadoo* held by the woman, skillfully sketched in deft brush strokes, also betrayed a gender: it was a *jhadoo* with a short handle normally used by women, the one which made them kneel and stoop as opposed to the long-handled male *jhadoo* that ensured that male sweeper could work while standing erect.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Manusmṛti* with the Commentary of Medhatithi by Ganganatha Jha (1920, ISBN 8120811550).

<sup>20</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru captures the caste politics around the broom in his letter dated June 12 1960 to Y. B. Chavan, Chief Minister of the Bombay State: A broom or a brush with a long handle, which can be used while a person is standing, is far more effective from the point of work and far less tiring to the person using it. So far as I know, all over the world these standing brooms or brushes are used. Why then do we carry on with a primitive, out of date,



*Devi Prasad: 'A Sweeper.' Crayon brushwork and ink on paper, Sevagram 1950s. Photograph courtesy: Naman P. Ahuja*

This divide resonates with the axial dynamics of the horizontal and the vertical that had already informed Coomaraswamy's cultural politics of transcendentalism. When Gandhi advised young Devi Prasad to sweep the floor, the lesson that this Father of the Nation intended is best captured by Groys' formulation of "vertical" politics and "horizontal" aesthetics.

Hence, it is not to the "vertical" infinity of divine truth that the artist today makes reference, but to the "horizontal" infinity of aesthetically equal images.<sup>21</sup>

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method which is inefficient and psychologically all wrong? Bending down in this way to sweep is physically more tiring and, I suppose, encourages a certain subservience in mind. *The Wire*, 14 November 2018. (This article was first published on May 27, 2017 and is being republished on November 14, 2018, Jawaharlal Nehru's birth anniversary.)

<sup>21</sup> Groys, p. 16.

## II. INDIA, AND THE WORLD (2018)

*India and the World* was a landmark exhibition that included more than 200 objects, with more than half traveling from the BM and the other half from the major national and regional museums in India.<sup>22</sup> These works were displayed in the capacious galleries of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, (CSMVS and formerly named the Prince of Wales Museum) Mumbai. While the broader concept of 'India and the World' drew from Neil MacGregor's *History of the World in 100 Objects*, the show was curated by two curators representing India and Britain: Naman P. Ahuja, New Delhi and Jeremy D. Hill, British Museum, respectively.

A collaborative venture of this scale across museums of uneven stature, between countries connected through colonisation, and threw open questions of aesthetic and discursive equality.<sup>23</sup>

All the artefacts in the exhibition were distributed across nine stories: Shared Beginnings; First Cities; Empire; State and Faith; Picturing the Divine; Indian Ocean Traders; Court Cultures; The Quest for Freedom; and finally: Time Unbound. It was clear that history as understood in the Western context was going to be a master frame and a common thread that ran through the nine themes.<sup>24</sup>

I will focus on two critical moments in this exhibition that directly relate with discursive equality. These concern transcultural elements

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<sup>22</sup> For exhibition catalogue and publication, see Naman P. Ahuja and Jeremy David Hill, (Introduction by Neil MacGregor) *India & the World: A History in Nine Stories*, Gurgaon: Penguin Random House India, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> For further discussion on *India and the World*, see my "Global Art History and its Asymmetries: From *The Global Contemporary* to *the India and the World Exhibitions*" in *Art Histories in a Global Context: Decentering Canons* edited by Gwen Farrelly and Ann Albritton (John Wiley & Sons: New Jersey) forthcoming.

<sup>24</sup> Despite Ahuja's best intentions not to follow the standard art historical teleology, with his postcolonial qualms about Hegelian historicism, the exhibition could not resist the linear logic of time. This necessitated a final gallery called Time Unbound.



that abound in the exhibition in which the setting up of comparisons of artworks and artefacts across disparate cultures cuts across the nine sections. The question of DE manifests itself both in the manner in which artefacts are juxtaposed in the display as well as the way they are placed in a temporal frame. Most evidently, it is in the annotation and the commentary offered by each of the curators in the documentary video that their interpretative frameworks are most legible.<sup>25</sup>

Let us turn to the comparison set up between a Mughal and Dutch painting by Ahuja which is clearly aimed at breaking up a linear teleology imposed by the historical frame and setting up a dialogue between Indian and non-Indian objects. A Mughal painting which shows Jehangir admiring a painting of European Madonna is placed next to a sketch by the Dutch painter, Rembrandt, made in a distinctly Mughal style. This juxtaposition that brings to the foreground a mutually shaping moment in Mughal and Dutch in the 17th century across half of the globe gives a lie to the claims of derivative discourse and foregrounds the complexity of artistic exchange across India and Holland.

Rembrandt is looking at Jehangir and Jehangir is looking at a European painting. So, at one level, it is a great opportunity to be able present to the world that it is not just Mughals who are learning from Europeans art but also European artists are enamoured by Indian art.<sup>26</sup>

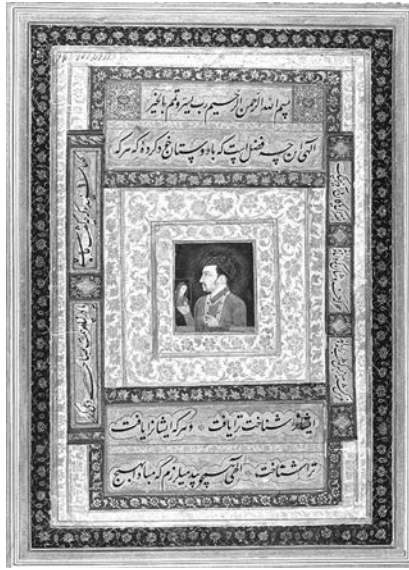
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<sup>25</sup> Given the collaborative nature of the *India and the World* show across countries and institutions, it was difficult to ascribe specific curatorial intentionality to either of the two main curators. The publication on the show put together by Naman P. Ahuja and Jeremy D. Hill follows the format of an elaborate exhibition catalogue, focuses on the theme of nine stories and does not supply this information either. It was the video documentary that offered an insight into their individual interpretative frames.

<sup>26</sup> Ahuja on the logic of the juxtaposition of *Jahangir Receiving an Officer* by Rembrandt with the Mughal water colour entitled *Jahangir Holding a Portrait of the Virgin Mary* at the *India and the World* show. Transcribed from his interview in the documentary on *India and the World: A History in Nine Stories*.



*'Jahangir receiving an officer' By Rembrandt, Paper, About AD 1656–61  
Holland. Height : 21 cm | Width : 18.4 cm. The British Museum (Gg,2.263)  
Photograph Courtesy: Naman P. Ahuja*



*'Jahangir holding a portrait of the Virgin Mary',  
Opaque watercolour and gold on paper Mughal, about AD 1620, Probably  
Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India.  
Height: 31 cm | Width: 22.5 cm National Museum, New Delhi (58.58/31).  
Photograph Courtesy: Naman P. Ahuja*

Such a comparison makes visible the curator's frame of discursive equality that allows for this reciprocal interrelationship between the two aesthetic traditions to come alive in the exhibition.

On the other hand, let us consider Hill's response to a contemporary sculptor, L. N. Tallur's *Unicode*. Taking a traditional bronze of Nataraj as a point of departure, the sculptor explodes the main icon of this god, as it were, leaving behind a cloud of concrete studded with coins. While the central deity undergoes erasure, what remains of the traditional iconography are the flaming halo and the demon at the foot of the absent god. What this iconoclastic gesture of the artist serves is to allude to the power of capital in globalisation to reduce all, including the sacred, to the sameness of money. The title *Unicode* affirms this homogeneity by way of the universal computer code. Overlooking the sculpture's contemporariness, Hill fills in the absent god and sees in it a confirmation of his own belief about cyclical time associated typically with Indian thought!

The piece *Unicode* is by a contemporary Indian artist and it is a modern take on that crucial Indian notion of cyclical nature of time, the way in which the universe has to be constantly remade. It is of course very different from the Western linear notion of time which you actually see for the rest of the exhibition. Juxtaposed with that is an Australian work of art, *Bush Potato Dreaming*, which is a picture of the dream time...<sup>27</sup>

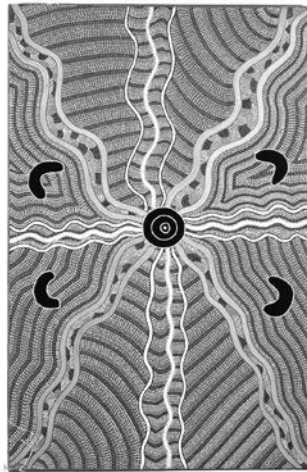
Completely disregarding Tallur's interpretative labour, Hill reads into the contemporary sculpture an embodiment of an "Indian notion of time" which further lets him see an affinity between the *Unicode* and an Australian aboriginal painting; both, he claimed, operated within a cyclical dream time. It is this professed affinity that explains the placement of the two radically different artworks in the same hall. Such an ethnologizing of Tallur's work seems to foreground the curator's epistemic violence when seen from the prism of discursive inequality.

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<sup>27</sup> Hill on the logic of the juxtaposition of L. N. Tallur's *Unicode* with Victor Jupurrula Ross's *Yarla Jukurrpa* (bush potato dreaming). Transcribed from his interview in the documentary on *India and the World: A History in Nine Stories*.



*'Unicode' By L.N. Tallur AD 2011 Tallur Studio, Koteshwara, Karnataka, India. Bronze, coins and concrete. Height: 183 cm. | Width: 152 cm | Depth: 117 cm Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (33SCLNT001)  
 Photograph Courtesy: Naman P. Ahuja*



*'yarla jukurrpa' (bush potato dreaming) By Victor Jupurrula Ross, Acrylic on canvas AD 1980–89 Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Association Yuendumu, Northern Territory, Australia. British Museum (Oc1987,04.7) Photograph Courtesy: Naman P. Ahuja*

## II. ARNA JHARNA: THE THAR DESERT MUSEUM

If you pick up something ordinary, something very marginal and give it the same intensity of thought as you would to a sculpture or a painting, a world of ideas can open up.

Rustom Bharucha<sup>28</sup>

A regional museum dedicated singularly to a broom or a *jhadoo* in rural Rajasthan is clearly no match for the grandiloquent *India and the World* show but it reflected a unique vision of its founder, Komal Kothari, an expert of Rajasthani folk music, history and culture. The decision to dedicate a museum to a broom posed an enormous challenge of how to give visibility to the invisible. Everyday objects like brooms tend to be consumed by their banality: they are instruments of cleanliness and they are designed to get rid of dust or ‘matter out of place, as the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) would describe dirt.’<sup>29</sup> In contrast, the artefacts mounted in the Mumbai show are primarily iconic objects, on loan from other museums, in which they already have an established place and lineage; in Douglas’ terms, these iconic and rare statues and paintings are matter already emplaced; some of them have distinguished careers like the famous *Townley Discobolus* with a career of exhibitionary value and having travelled across many curatorial frames.

On the other hand, the brooms displayed at the Arna Jharna Museum involved neither any comparable curatorial labour nor a history of display; rather, it appears that this ethnographic museum has given scant attention to the strategies of display and placement of the brooms. As noted by Bharucha, the project director of the museum,

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<sup>28</sup> Rustom Bharucha, a well-known culture theorist has had a long association with the Arna Jharna: The Thar Desert Museum, given his intellectual collaboration with Komal Kothari, the founder of the Museum. Quoted by Anasuya Basu, “Ever thought of visiting a broom museum?” *The Telegraph*, published 9.06.19.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2000) (first published 1966) p. 36.

The principle of the museum is to encourage visitors to pick up the brooms, touch them, use them and then put them back.<sup>30</sup>

The fact that brooms, Bharucha further points out, are one of the most unacknowledged of tools of everyday life, posed enormous challenge to the ‘curator,’ i.e. Kothari himself:

...in its [broom’s] absence, the world would be more fragmented and disordered than it already is, divested of the most rudimentary sense of well-being. In making the invisible visible, the curatorial thrust is towards manifesting a new value and sociality around the broom, just as the attempt to listen to the voices of broommakers and sweepers is a small step in making the inaudible audible.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, given that the brooms are placed on a raised platform ostentatiously lifts them up to their new museological function of display. The museum by now has more than two hundred brooms in its collection made by traditional broom-makers in a range of materials from different types of grasses, bushes, leaves and other materials. Some of the brooms have been gifted by the women who had in fact made them. But once they are placed in the context of this museum, they primarily address the non-users, or the museum going public.

It is the acknowledgement of different materiality and uses of the brooms that led Kothari to evolve a unique spatial order for his museum: he divided the physical structure of the Museum into three spaces— one room displayed brooms that were made out of sturdier grass, used in outdoor spaces such as courtyards, streets and highways; another was dedicated to brooms created out of softer reeds and grass for sweeping indoors; and a third room was meant for documentation, exhibition and filming.

It is in this third space that Bharucha wanted the brooms to be more than docile objects. He had thought of a more animated display wherein each broom would have an audio recording of its maker tell-

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<sup>30</sup> Anasuya Basu, *The Telegraph*, Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Bharucha, “On Bones and Brooms: Re-Materialising the Imaginary of the Future,” p. 637.



*Arna Jharna: The Thar Desert Museum, near Jodhpur, Rajasthan.  
Photograph courtesy: Rustom Bharucha Arna Jharna: The Thar Desert  
Museum*

ing its story. If the statues at the *India and the World* were invested with the task of narrating a civilizational history, the brooms had to foreground their maker and rescue them from the oblivion of timeless labour. But there was a problem — most of the broom-makers spoke in local dialects making it formidable for the English-speaking public from entering their lifeworld.

At the same time, the brooms could not be allowed to remain just objects of display as they were also tools of labour with a long history. In place of a separate pedestal, each broom has a tag around it offering information about its materiality and the corresponding function. Does this ‘aesthetics’ of display of the brooms as sequentially placed objects reduplicate the logic of docile bodies that the curator has set out to counter?

How do we talk about equal rights of a *jhadoo* (anti-iconic) as an aesthetic object? What does aesthetics mean here? Neither Kantian aesthetics that had little truck with objects of use nor classical Indian aes-

thetics of the *śilpa śāstras*, premised as they were upon the division between theory (*śāstra* as intellectual labour) and practice (*prayoga* as manual labour) offers us a pertinent framework.

Dreams of an emancipated spectator are unlikely to emerge from a traditional category of 'margi' and 'desi' enmeshed as it is in the binary logic of caste and gender politics. This category both in their premodern and modern usage is too imbricated in the long civilizational history of unequal distribution of labour. What if we mine the Indic past for a non-hegemonic take on skills? The process of drawing out the principles of traditional practices and placing them within recontextualised habits of contemporary life may not be easy. But it is instructive to turn to a modern illustration of the traditional list of sixty-four skills (*catushashti kalās*) displayed at the Crafts Museum, New Delhi, made by a team of traditionally trained *pata* (scroll) painters from Orissa who were commissioned by the Museum.

The list of skills ranged from singing (*gita vidyā*), playing on musical instruments (*vādya vidyā*), dancing, (*nritya vidyā*) to more intellectual skills such as the art of making and solving riddles (*prahelika*), art of reciting books (*pustaka-vacana*), composing verse mentally (*manasi kavya-kriyā*) and others. The fact that these skills resist being subsumed under the 'desi' and 'margi' categories and that they spill out from the high Sanskrit sources to regional intellectual traditions offers us a promise to imagine an emancipatory spectator.<sup>32</sup>

A list of skills is not as prescriptive as rules laid down in the *śilpa śāstras*. In the past, the *silpis* or the artisans who aspired for social mobility relied on the Brahmins to codify their practice in Sanskrit and lend legitimacy to their practice. The list of sixty-four skills, however ambiguous some of them may be, foregrounds practice. The fact that it frustrates any attempt at our segregation of manual and intellectual labour raises the possibility of imagining unalienated labour in the past.

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<sup>32</sup> These sixty-four *kalas* or skills are widely available across the regional languages like Tamil, Telugu, Oriya, etc.



It is from the prism of labour that the entry of a *jhadoo* into a museum can signal the radical possibility of reimagining a community of the future for whom museums will not be an impossible space to enter.<sup>33</sup>

*Postscript:*

If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.

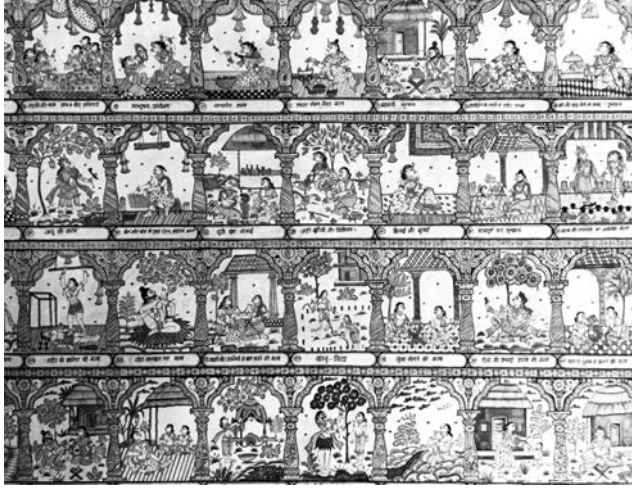
Martin Luther King Jr.

Even as a thought experiment, it is hard to shuffle up the artefacts of these two museums and imagine a broom, an object of daily use, to be sharing space with a carved *Garuda* or a marble *Discobolus*. Why? A *jhadoo* in this setting will be a mismatch next to the gleaming and dust free statues. In its relationship to the art works in the *India and the World* show, it will have to be an absent other. After ridding the floors of this show of the dust and grime, the *jhadoo* would have to disappear into the museum storeroom. Can there be a museum dedicated to absent objects? Can absent objects like the *jhadoo* imply an absent community?

Strangely, King Jr.'s inspired homage to the street sweeper resonates too closely for comfort with Coomaraswamy's *svadharmā* and its insidious logic that each caste must revel in the tasks delegated to it and hone its skills but remain within its boundaries. Where are the archives, the records, and museums that have showcased the "work" of a sweeper? This prompts an exploration into the relationship between

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<sup>33</sup> Today, gripped as we are by the Coronavirus pandemic, new work ethics and distribution of labour are unfolding in our domestic spaces. Middle class Indian men are discovering new skills of domestic labour, including the use of the *jhadoo* and often learning them under the supervision of their wives. "Care" is less a pejorative term associated with unpaid domestic labour, confined to a woman's domain and more associated with the respectability of the medical professionals.



*'Artists from Orissa depicting Chausath Kalas, Odisha'. Creators: Akshaya Kumar Bariki, Sushanta Kumar Mohapatra, Narayan Pradhan and Mahindra Malik. Gallery: Crafts Museum, Delhi. Photograph Courtesy: Parul Dave Mukherji*

labour and language. The labour carried out by a hinges between a transitive (*sakarmaka*) and intransitive verb (*akarmaka*)<sup>34</sup> because it will make sense with and without exerting its action on an object. A *jhadoo* sweeps the floor but it can also simply sweep. Whereas the labour that creates a statue is like the transitive verb; an artist shapes a material and requires that to express a complete thought. In the process, he (rarely she) leaves behind a remainder that can be archived and museumized. What will it take for “all the hosts of heaven and earth” to pause before a broom and say that “here lies a great broom that did its job well”! It will take a museum of the future to move beyond its “transitive” narration and its metaphysics of presence to reimagine its objects. And the Arna Jharna Museum asserts that any such re-imagination of the contents of the museum will have to pass through the path of the re-imagination of the community itself.

<sup>34</sup> George Cardona, Ashok Aklujkar, Ogawa Hideyo, *Studies in Sanskrit Grammars* (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 2011).

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*Greer Valley*

## Is there still hope?

Imagined pasts and redemptive futures in the  
*Goede Hoop* (Good Hope) exhibition at the  
Rijksmuseum

In February 2017, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam opened the exhibition *Goede Hoop, Zuid Afrika en Nederland vanaf 1600* (Good Hope: South Africa and the Netherlands from 1600). It was described as the “first major exhibition about the relationship between South Africa and the Netherlands” and sought to show “400 years of emotive history in 300 items, most of which come from South Africa” (Rijksmuseum, 2017). The exhibition ran until May 21, 2017 and formed part of the Rijksmuseum’s “Country Series” of exhibitions and publications. South Africa was one of the nine countries and former Dutch colonies identified by the museum’s history department to have had a special historic relationship with the Netherlands in addition to Indonesia, Japan, China, India, Sri Lanka, Ghana, Surinam and Brazil. *Goede Hoop* was the first curated exhibition in the Country Series initiative, which had been publication-based up to that point.

In a short documentary on the Rijksmuseum’s YouTube channel, Museum TV, Martine Gosselink, former head of the History department at the Rijksmuseum discusses the impacts of colonial settlement on present-day South Africa. In the documentary, she suggests that *Goede Hoop*’s curatorial team had set out to expose the colonial past of the Netherlands and the crimes of their “distant cousins”, the Boers and Afrikaners, descendants of Dutch colonial settlers. In a similar vein, the promotional material for *Goede Hoop* suggests that the exhibition was a move towards a reassessment of the museographic treatment of colonisation and a reframing of the history of the “Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie” (Dutch East India Company), also known as the

VOC.<sup>1</sup> The successes of the VOC in former Dutch colonies led to what has become known as the Golden Age of Dutch commerce. An attempt at reframing this history in the Netherlands is significant because the VOC occupies a prominent position in the collective popular memory of the Netherlands and its national public narrative is built around the “Golden Age” or *De Gouden Eeuw*. As the Dutch social and cultural anthropologist Gloria Wekker argues, this historical period is integral to the Dutch conception of self and other (Wekker, 2016).

The *Goede Hoop* exhibition marked the beginning of the Rijksmuseum’s critical look at the history of Dutch colonialism and the beginning of a series of exhibitions that would investigate this topic. It was also the first exhibition on colonialism at the Rijksmuseum in 15 years. In the foreword to the catalogue for *Goede Hoop*, the Rijksmuseum’s director, Taco Dibbits writes that “the historical relationship between the Netherlands and South Africa shares much with other colonial relationships in other countries, and to an extent, the Good Hope (*Goede Hoop*) exhibition can be seen as an account of colonial rule in a more general sense” (2017: 13). The ambitious nature of the project and its potentiality to reach various spheres of the Dutch public is exemplified in the seven-part television series inspired by the exhibition, also called *Goede Hoop*.<sup>2</sup> It was aired by Dutch public broadcaster, NTR.

### CURATING A “SHARED HISTORY”

South Africa and the Netherlands share a history dating back to the first VOC settlement in 1652 that continues in the present. Relations between the Netherlands and the former Dutch Cape Colony remained significant in many areas, long after British takeover. The Cape Colony

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<sup>1</sup> Vereenigde Landsche Ge-Oktroyeerde Oostindische Compagnie, better known to the Anglophone world as the Dutch East India Company or as the VOC. The executive directorate of the VOC was called the Heeren Sewentien or the “Lords Seventeen”. The Company had a federal character, comprising six chambers. [<https://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/dutch-east-india-company-deicvoc>] accessed 30 October 2018.

<sup>2</sup> <http://archieef.ntr.nl/goedehoop/index.html>

was unique in many instances, as it attracted many settlers from the Netherlands and other parts of Europe as the Netherlands encouraged Europeans of other nationalities to settle in its colonies. The curators of *Goede Hoop* tried to represent the complex and stratified social worlds resulting from the colonial entanglement of the two countries, but the exhibition fell short in several ways.

The layout of *Goede Hoop* replicates the chronological arrangement of Rijksmuseum. Much like the way the Rijksmuseum is structured, the *Goede Hoop* exhibition ended in the 20th century, post the release of the former president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela. This way of exhibiting naturalises the notion of continuous time. As Stacy Douglas (2017) contends, “conceptions of time become central in orienting the relationship between an imagined past and an imagined future by telling a narrative from which political projects, communities and subjects are imagined, rendering the messiness of political community into an ordered whole. In this way, time functions as an anamorphic orientation at work in the museum” (Douglas, 2017: 64).

The exhibition occupied the ten galleries in the Rijksmuseum’s Phillips Wing. It was designed to begin with the arrival of the first Dutch ships in the Cape Region in 1600 and end with Nelson Mandela’s visit to Amsterdam in 1990. The first part of the exhibition is divided into distinct historical periods starting with 1600-1652 (*Pre-colonial South Africa*), 1652-1700 (*Confrontation in the Cape*), 1700-1800 (*I am an Afrikaner*), 1800-1900 (*South Africa in the Nineteenth Century*) and 1899-1902 (*The Boer War*). The second part of the exhibition deals with the twentieth century: the two World Wars, Apartheid and 1994 and beyond. Visitors are meant to experience *Goede Hoop* as a walk through time, and the layout of the exhibition greatly influences how South Africa’s historical relationship with the Netherlands should be perceived.

The curators structured the exhibition around three key figures that they identified as essential to the story of the shared history between the two countries. Jan Van Riebeeck, Paul Kruger, and Nelson Man-

dela are the three historical figures who represent the three phases of Dutch History in South Africa. Van Riebeeck's figure marks the arrival of the Dutch on South African shores. Kruger represents Dutch-Afrikaner kinship during the Anglo-Boer War and South African support for the Netherlands following the Second World War. Nelson Mandela represents the period of anti-apartheid activism in the Netherlands and the dawn of democracy in South Africa.

On entering the exhibition, the viewer encounters the curatorial statement. Adjacent to this is the board "Thanks and Acknowledgements," that listed all the stakeholders involved. Under the heading "Curators," I expected to see some collaboration with South African curators, artists, scholars, or researchers, but none are listed. This text set the tone for the experience that would follow as I moved through the exhibition from room to room when I visited the *Goede Hoop* exhibition in May 2017.

Every room in the exhibition deals with a particular period as defined by the curators. For each period, the curators ask a set of questions that act as the rationale that precedes the design of the room. For the design of the first gallery representing the period 1600 – 1652, the curators ask the following questions: "What did South Africa look like before the arrival of the Westerners?; What was the first contact between the Dutch and Cape of Good Hope like? And, who lived in the country at the time of the arrival of the Portuguese and VOC?" (Rijksmuseum, 2017). The first room of *Goede Hoop* intended to address the world the Dutch invaded: precolonial South Africa, the world inhabited by indigenous Khoekhoe and San people of the Western Cape region. A panoramic ink and watercolour image of Table Bay that has likely been painted by Johannes Schumacher but previously attributed to Jacob Gordon fills the walls of the room. The textual information and objects on display are minimal. In the centre of the room, are six pieces of rock: three with drawings made by the San while three have Portuguese and Dutch inscriptions. Drawings by the San are of people and animals in the region and depictions of ships on rock that date between 1600

and 1800. During the early time of colonial exploration, European sailors made inscriptions on large stones that would contain letters. They were mostly carved in capitals and state when a crew had arrived, the name of the ship and date of departure. These stones would often contain important information about potential dangers or difficulties experienced by the ship's crew. When new ships arrived, crew members would check for letters left by their countrymen. Many of these stones are preserved and inscribed in Portuguese Dutch, French and English text, evidence of the various groups that sailed and docked their ship around the Cape's coastal region.

By juxtaposing these two early forms of communication by the indigenous inhabitants and European sailors, the curators are making a statement about life at the Cape at the time and the contact the indigenous peoples had with the Europeans. By this, the curators counter the fictitious apartheid-era narrative that the Dutch "discovered" and settled on empty land. It also shows that prior to 1652, (when Jan Van Riebeeck was tasked by the VOC to set up the refreshment station in the Cape) there had already been meetings between Europeans and indigenous Africans in the region. The display in this room sets up the notion of shared history – a conceptual idea that *Goede Hoop* is premised on. Centring this exhibition on the concept of a shared history presents one of the problems with how colonial histories are dealt with in European museums. The notion of a shared history is not only imagined but it also homogenises and depoliticises the interactions between the groups that were involved in the colonial encounter.

The second room in the exhibition deals with the period 1652 to 1700, and this marks the start of the Dutch colonial period in the Cape. The museum states that "it was during the first ten years, the era of the first commander, Dutchman Jan Van Riebeeck, that the foundations were laid for future relations between the Netherlands and South Africa" (Rijksmuseum, 2017). The key question this section is meant to address is: "what happens when white folks come to live in a black country?" (Rijksmuseum, 2017). As the heritage scholars, Nick Shepherd and



Christian Ernten point out, the Dutch most likely did not think of themselves as white in the early 17th century, just as South Africa was not a “black country”. The concept of a white or a black race only came into existence in Europe in the late 17th century, and it was not universally accepted at the time. They offer instead that “surely, the story here is about the historical coming into being of ideas of ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ as a result of colonial institutions and apartheid, rather than a retrospective projecting of such identities back in time?” (Shepherd and Ernten, 2017). This point is critical, as this question reveals the dominant way that race is understood in the Netherlands in the present. As Gloria Wekker points out, in a Dutch context, whiteness is not acknowledged as a racial, ethnicised positioning, but is generally seen as the default and devoid of meaning. In her book *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, her thesis is that an “unacknowledged reservoir of knowledge and affects based on four hundred years of Dutch imperial rule plays a vital but unacknowledged part in dominant meaning-making processes, including the making of the self, taking place in Dutch society” (2016: 2).

The Rijksmuseum is integral to fostering a sense of Dutchness in the Netherlands and positioning that identity as binary to those it considers other. As Wekker argues, “the construction of the European self and its others took place in the force fields of conquest, colonisation, empire formation, permanent settlement by Europeans, nationalist struggles by the colonised, and selective decolonisation. Contemporary constructions of “us”, those constructed as belonging to Europe and “them” those constructed as not belonging, vary over time” (Wekker, 2016: 21). In an analysis of *Goede Hoop*, it does not appear as though the exhibition team considered how this white, European sense of self (as a legacy of colonialism) operates, not only in terms of the Dutch colonial presence in contemporary South Africa but also in the Netherlands.

On display in the second room are drawings of the objects used in the daily life of the Khoekhoe, oil paintings and drawings of Dutch ships, and 17th century maps made by the VOC. Research by the his-

torian, Nigel Worden, shows that at the time of Dutch settlement in the Western Cape, the area consisted of complex social networks that had been formed by indigenous inhabitants. Worden (2012) writes that the region currently known as the Western Cape was “socially complex and economically diverse before colonial settlers moved in” (Worden, 2012: 11). The invasion of this world by Van Riebeeck and the VOC marks the beginning of a period of conflict characterised by land dispossession, murder and genocide as experienced by the pastoralist Khoekhoe and hunter-gatherer San communities.

Jan Van Riebeeck was initially sent to the Cape to set up a refreshment station for the VOC’s ships that would dock at the Cape en route to the Netherlands’ Eastern territories. As the demand for meat and vegetables supply increased, more land was required (SAHO, 2013: para 1). The Dutch settlers began to seize land from the Khoekhoe and San to increase Dutch grazing pastures, expand farming activities and to establish settlements (SAHO, 2013: para 2). This reduction of grazing pastures for the Khoekhoe pastoralists created friction and conflict between the Dutch and the indigenous groups. The Khoekhoe resisted the commandeering of their ancestral lands, but over time they were overpowered by the Dutch settlers. The loss of land meant the Khoekhoe farmers became deprived of their livelihood and were forced to seek employment on the farmlands of white colonial settlers, often living in dehumanising conditions (SAHO, 2013: para 2). Together with the land seizures, the VOC altered the landscape of the Table Bay region by erecting permanent structures and cultivating gardens, thereby alienating the local inhabitants. Many of the structures and buildings built by the Dutch settlers and their descendants have been named the “Cape Dutch” architectural style and is often problematically referred to as the Western Cape’s vernacular architecture. Many of these structures remain in present-day South Africa and are meticulously maintained and protected under the South African National Heritage Resources Act and along with monuments and statues, are potent symbols of colonialism.

*Goede Hoop* does not address the violence of oppression and resistance characteristic of this period. Yet, it marks this time as signifi-

cant by including Jan Van Riebeeck's figure (Figure 1) as critical to the narrative of the history it claims to represent. The centrality of Jan Van Riebeeck as a significant historical figure in Afrikaner nationalist history is another omission. This is important to show, because it was fundamental in historicising Afrikaner nationalism and its claim to a European identity.

On the charcoal-coloured walls of the second room, the Dutch word *Ingepikt* (Stolen) (Figure 2) is painted in white paint reminiscent of the style of lettering used on a protest placard. Words and phrases drawn on the walls in this style appear throughout the exhibition. This text could represent the insurgent voices of South Africa at the time – those of indigenous groups, enslaved people and anti-apartheid activists. On the surface, these statements appear to be subversive, but while they may counter popular Dutch perspectives of colonialism, they appear disjointed from the rest of the exhibition. Moreover, this gesture reads as an aesthetic insertion, rather than to convey a meaningful engagement with Dutch colonial history.

The accumulation of land and wealth by colonial settlers came at great expense to the indigenous inhabitants of South Africa. Colonisation led to the dispossession of black South Africans' property that began in the 17th century when the first free Burgher, Jan Hendrik Boom, began farming a plot of land previously used as grazing pastures by the Khoekhoe (SAHO, 2019). Centuries later, the 1913 Natives Land Act of South Africa wrote into law the theft of land that had occurred over time and further established a policy of forced removals entrenching this dispossession and prevented the emergence of a class of black landowners. It is imperative that the issue of land dispossession as it relates to colonialism, is addressed in the present. However, while the statement *Ingepikt* is provocative, the exhibition text and objects displayed in the room do not go into detail on the idea of colonial theft. The notion of stolen land is particularly pertinent to an exhibition on colonialism in South Africa, given the robustness of recent public debates, policy discussions and activism around land reform. This is mainly in relation to the proposed 18th amendment bill of South Africa's Constitution which seeks



*Figure 1: A display in Goede Hoop centered on a portrait of VOC commander Jan Van Riebeeck, who started the first Dutch Settlement in 1652 in South Africa. The Rijksmuseum starts and ends the Goede Hoop exhibition with Van Riebeeck. Photograph: Greer Valley, 2017.*



*Figure 2: The text "Ingepikt" (Stolen) painted on the walls in Gallery 2. Photograph: Greer Valley, 2017.*



*Figure 3: The text “Ik Ben Een Afrikaander” boldly painted across the walls of Gallery 3. Photograph: Greer Valley, 2017.*



*Figure 4: Slave bell. Photograph: Greer Valley, 2017.*



*Figure 5: Ethnographic studies by Robert Jacob Gordon. The Rijksmuseum had planned on installing this display in the IZIKO South African Museum, but the South African leg of the Goede Hoop exhibition was cancelled.  
 Photograph: Greer Valley, 2017.*



*Figure 6: An apartheid-era public bench with the instruction “Net Blankes” / “Whites Only” is placed below other public signs that enforced spatial apartheid in South African town and cities. Photograph: Greer Valley, 2017.*



*Figure 7: Posters from the Dutch anti-apartheid campaign are mounted below the slogan “To hell with Afrikaans”.*

*Photograph: Greer Valley, 2017.*



*Figure 8: An image of Nelson and Winne Mandela in Leidseplein after Nelson Mandela’s release from prison marks the end of apartheid.*

*Photograph: Greer Valley, 2017.*





Figure 9: Pieter Hugo's 1994 series.  
Photograph: Greer Valley, 2017.



Figure 10: This small display of #FeesMustFall posters is placed near to the exit. Photograph: Greer Valley, 2017.



to make changes to Section 25 of the Bill of Rights that would warrant the expropriation of property without compensation. Curiously, *Goede Hoop* shied away from this, showing how exhibition practice cements a partial and limited visual legacy.

The display in the next room ushers the audience into the 18th century. By the 18th century, a complex settler society had emerged at the Cape with major disparities of wealth and status amongst the colonists (Worden, 2012). Three processes contributed to this development: Free Burghers, Slavery, and the expansion of the Dutch settlement & encroachment on the land of local pastoralists (forcing them to migrate or working as servants to the Dutch). Audiences are met with the slogan *Ik ben een Afrikaander* (I am an Afrikaner') (Figure 3) painted in the same style as *Ingepikt*.

The word *Ik* (I) is underlined here. This could be interpreted as the problematising of the subjectivity *Afrikaner* or *Afrikaander* and is reiterated by the exhibition label "Genesis of the Afrikaner or Afrikaander". This label does not explain the historical complexity of the terms *Afrikaander* or *Afrikaner*, or the politicisation of the term. Instead, it reinforces narrow understandings of who this group of people are and their history. This history, much of it repressed and erased during Apartheid by Afrikaner nationalists, complicates the idea of the Afrikaner as "white" and "European" and troubles notions of racial purity (Valley and Valley, 2009). The first people who identified as Afrikaanders were African or of both African and European descent. Klaas Afrikaner and his son Jager Afrikaner were members of the Oorlam community that formed part of the broader Khoekhoe society. The history of the word *Afrikaner* can be traced to the mid 18th century when emancipated slaves and enslaved peoples born in the Cape Colony were known as Afrikaners or Afrikanders. At the time, settlers of Dutch descent referred to themselves as *Boere*, *Christene* and *Nederlanders*. More than a century later, the forced Europeanisation of the Afrikaans language started as an ideological project by the group *Die Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners* (the Association of True Afrikaners) (Valley and Valley, 2009). This group sought to nationalise the Afrikaans language after

it found that fewer people of Dutch descent were speaking pure Dutch and were speaking the creole language Afrikaans in increasing numbers.

In the 18th century, the Dutch East India Company continued its expansion and left its mark on South Africa. Dutch gabled architecture appeared in towns all over the Western Cape and grapevines were planted by the Huguenots (French protestants reaching the Cape via the Netherlands). The Dutch were expanding into territory once occupied by the Khoekhoe, driving them away with ecologically damaging farming practices. Soon the VOC needed labour on the farms they established on the land seized from the Khoekhoe, and in 1658 the first enslaved peoples were forcibly imported into South Africa from present-day Angola (SAHO, 2017). Enslaved people from other parts of Africa, Madagascar, India and Indonesia were brought into South Africa from 1658 onwards. They brought with them their cultures, languages and religions, contributing to the diversity that would later characterise the South African nation. Text on display at the *Goede Hoop* exhibition reads “these groups were not homogeneous: sexual relations between Khoekhoe, enslaved, free- and European colonists were for a long time considered completely normal” (Rijksmuseum, 2017).

Installed in this room, are displays of what is known as Cape furniture (with Dutch, Cape and Javanese influences), drawings of 18th century Cape townships, portrait paintings of prominent Dutch colonial families and their luxury belongings. Also on display, are paintings showing enslaved people, slave yokes and a slave bell (Figure 4).

These objects represent the power structures that would characterise the socio-political landscape of South Africa over centuries with its wealthy white settler and black labour class. This section of the exhibition addresses the colonial Cape region, but noticeably absent is any information on or representation of the network of colonies in the Indian ocean of which Cape Town became part of from 1652 to 1795. It is essential to show the global impact the Netherlands had during its colonial period as this contextualises the relationship the country has

with its other former colonies. The Rijksmuseum may be thinking to address this in their upcoming exhibition on slavery (at the time of writing it is scheduled for 2021). This omission is another missed opportunity to explore how slavery and slave history shaped present-day South Africa and how the psyche of the Western Cape, particularly, is still deeply rooted in the relations between master and slave.

Another panoramic illustration of Table Bay runs across the wall opposite to the wall with the text *Ik ben een Afrikander*. This print leads us to *Goede Hoop's* largest gallery and the second part of the display on the 18th century. This room contains a display of meticulously detailed, ethnographic drawings and paintings made by the explorer Robert Jacob Gordon (1743-1795) (Figure 5).

Gordon was a Dutchman of Scottish descent, who undertook several scientific expeditions to the South African interior. During these expeditions, Gordon made many sketches of the country's people, flora and fauna and made several panoramas of the landscape, some more than seven meters in length. The text claims that Gordon is the first person to make a detailed study of the country and its inhabitants: "During his journeys, he negotiated between the colonial farmers and the Khoikhoi, San and Xhosa. Even the giraffe skeleton is on display that Gordon sent to Stadtholder Willem V, which is usually on view in the Museum Nationale d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris, and which has now been reconstructed here bone by bone" (Rijksmuseum, 2017).

Moving on from the Gordon collection to the room that deals with the 19th century, there is a sense that a shift in power is eminent as the exhibition marks the end of Dutch rule in South Africa. This shift is illustrated by the emphasis on the British invasion of Cape Town as described by the label "1806: British Empire Annexes the Cape". However, the label includes an acknowledgement that the Dutch descendants, called 'Boeren' (Boers – South Africans of Dutch, German, or Huguenot descent) also referred to as the "distant cousins" of the Dutch continue to have a presence in South Africa after Dutch rule ended. The text then briefly mentions Afrikaner support for Nazis during the Second World War and that Dutch Social Nationalists

moved to South Africa after the war. The display shows how the Boers founded their republics, the Orange Free State and Transvaal. Flags metres in length, bibles and embroidered bonnets symbolise the ‘Dutch’ South Africa that the English encountered when gold and diamonds were discovered. Nineteenth-century photographic portraits show the descendants of the Dutch settlers in South Africa with surnames such as Waterboer, Potgieter and Kok, and, unnamed local Indigenous people.

On display are landscape paintings by the Dutch – South African artist Jacob Hendrik Pierneef, a member of the Afrikaner Broederbond<sup>3</sup> who was heavily influenced by Afrikaner nationalism and its desire to carve out a unique identity following the Anglo-Boer war. He is widely critiqued for depicting empty landscapes void of indigenous South African homesteads or life outside of that of the Afrikaner. Pierneef’s illustrations are drawn from the historical canon of the Afrikaners, like the Great Trek, for magazines like *Die Huisgenoot* which strongly identified with the burgeoning Afrikaner Nationalism. During apartheid, art was used to remind Afrikaners of their Dutch roots and worked to engender a sense of history and cultural heritage and to link the Afrikaner to a European identity and therefore, with whiteness and racial purity. The fashioning of a European identity for the Afrikaner and Pierneef’s role in this is not addressed by *Goede Hoop*. We are introduced to the president of the then Transvaal, Paul Kruger, or “Oom Paul” as he is affectionately known to both the Dutch and Dutch descendants in South Africa alike. Kruger represents the second phase of the Dutch presence in South Africa. He was a popular figure in the Netherlands and was regularly received by Dutch Queen Wilhelmina in her palace. Souvenirs, prints, busts and Kruger memorabilia on display vouch for his immense popularity.

The display in the final two rooms of *Goede Hoop* deals with the 20th century and is introduced with the text on the wall, “The 20th century was the century of apartheid in South Africa” (Rijksmuseum,

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<sup>3</sup> The Afrikaner Broederbond (Brotherhood) was a secret society of the Afrikaner elite. High-ranking members of this organization included academics, politicians and members of the Afrikaner clergy.

2017). This section of the exhibition has two parts: the period of apartheid and Afrikaner nationalist rule and post-1994, democratic South Africa. The photographs, posters, sculptures and exhibition text on display begin to weave together a story of South Africa under apartheid, explaining spatial segregation, race-based laws and the relationships between white and black South Africans. To illustrate the latter, documentary photographs by the Dutch photographer Ed van der Elsken made between 1958 and 1968 show the absurdity and the tragedy of apartheid social relations.

A bench bearing the sign '*Net Blankes / Whites Only*' speaks to the way segregationist laws were enforced in public. Curated above the park bench are the signs that would have permeated everyday public life, including those on entrances to public buildings, in buses and on trains as well as on public benches and restroom doors (Figure 6).

The brutality and the violence of apartheid is represented here, as is the resistance struggle led by black South Africans. In this regard, the exhibition highlights the Sharpeville Massacre and the Soweto Uprisings. However, the focal point of this part of the show is the anti-apartheid campaign in the Netherlands (Figure 7).

Anti-apartheid posters include those of campaigns that held Dutch companies like Shell accountable for refusing to divest from South Africa and thereby supporting the apartheid government. In this section, there is again a deliberate attempt at distancing the Dutch from Afrikaner nationalists ("distant cousins") and no connection is made between apartheid and colonialism, suggesting that apartheid was solely a result of Afrikaner Nationalism. During apartheid, it was unacceptable in Dutch society to be openly in favour of the South African government. The Second World War was fresh in the memory of the Dutch public and the apartheid system was seen as repugnant to the majority of Dutch people.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> However, there were parts of Dutch society that called for an understanding of the policies of the South African 'brethren people'. Editor of the weekly

The second part of this room addresses the post-apartheid and contemporary South Africa. This section starts with the photograph of Nelson Mandela and Nomzamo Winnie Mandela (Figure 8) in Leidseplein, during their visit to Amsterdam in 1990, after Nelson Mandela's release from prison. In the narrative of *Goede Hoop*, Nelson Mandela's figure represents the third and final phase of Dutch History in South Africa. In this room, Nelson Mandela is deified as the representative of both struggle and freedom and most-importantly, reconciliation. Post-1994 life in South Africa is reflected through the work of two prominent South African artists: Marlene Dumas and Pieter Hugo. The South African photographer, Pieter Hugo's *1994* is on display in the final gallery in the exhibition (Figure 9). *1994* is a series of portraits of children born after 1994 in South Africa and Rwanda. This work acknowledges that major political events took place in these countries in 1994, namely the end of apartheid and the first democratic elections in South Africa and the death of the Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana, which sparked the Rwandan genocide. According to Hugo's gallerist, Stevenson, Hugo's series "depicts a generation of children growing up in a post-revolutionary era, when the possibility of change was definite while its realisation remains uncertain" (Stevenson, 2016). Hugo's overtly stylised portraits are of children in Rwanda and South Africa, posed against a backdrop of nature, evoking a sense of youth, innocence and hope. However, despite the optimism of youth, these children appear to be haunted by something. Perhaps this is the burden of their countries' past? Hugo has received both acclaim and criticism for his work. Critics question the way his photographs exoticize their subjects, accusing the photographer of reproducing the anthropological gaze that forms part of the colonial apparatus of looking. It would be disingenuous not to take Hugo's positionality, as a white South African male into account here. Because of these critiques, to include Hugo's photographs in this exhibition to illustrate contemporary, post-colonial South Africa is a curious curatorial choice when there are other

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Haagse Post, G.B.J Hiltermann described apartheid as an acceptable solution to the "race problem" (Muskens, 2017: 301).

South African photographers and artists from groups that have been marginalised because of the past that the exhibition is trying to show. This section of the exhibition represents South Africa in the contemporary, a country burdened with the inherited injustices of colonialism and apartheid. The choice of what to display here was a chance for the curators to show how colonialism affects South Africa in the present. It was also a chance to include the work of black, women artists from South Africa, particularly after #RhodesMustFall's impact on shifting the public discourse on the intersections between colonialism, race and gender.

Consultations with art historians, curators and scholars from South Africa could have altered the way the exhibition was received. Several South African artists have been thinking about the connection between Dutch colonialism and South Africa. For example, among others, the artists Bronwyn Katz, Andrew Putter, and Johannes Phokela use Dutch colonial references in their work. Phokela subverts, satirises and exploits the works of old masters to comment on power relations in the past and present. Katz' early work focusses on exhumation and its connection to land possession in South Africa. Her solo exhibition, *Groenpunt* (2016) problematised the notion of the forgetting and erasure of memory, instead looking to traces and residue of memory as an archive. Putter's work mines early colonial history at the Cape. For example, his *Secretly I Will Love You More* (2007) revisits the relationship between Maria Della Quellerie, wife of Jan van Riebeeck, and Krotoa, daughter of a Cochoqua chief. Krotoa was taken into the Van Riebeeck home, as a servant to the Van Riebeecks and later became an interpreter between the Dutch and the Khoekhoe. Putter's works ask us to reconsider the way historic relationships have been cast in history textbooks by intentionally blurring the boundary between what is considered historical fact and fiction. Both Putter and Phokela use humour to reflect the absurdity and violence embedded in this history. It could also have been interesting to invite the cross-disciplinary artist Senzeni Marasela to reflect on the work she produced for the Upstream Public Art project (2002). The Upstream Public Art project was an international art event that commemorated the 400 year anniversary

of the founding of the Dutch East Indies Company. The Upstream art route took place along several locations in Amsterdam and the town of Hoorn from which the VOC ships had set sail for colonial voyages. Marasela's work *Rainbow Stories* at the Hortus in Amsterdam refers to the way that history is documented, particularly that of the Afrikaners. In *Rainbow Stories*, Marasela reflected on her childhood, growing up in an extreme right-wing, Afrikaans suburb in South Africa. Engaged in deeply political art practice, she often works with cotton thread to make objects that work to insert her history into a past that omitted the stories of black South Africans, particularly those of black South African women.

The *Goede Hoop* curatorial team had initially compiled a list of ten artists they wished to include in this gallery, including Mary Sibande and Zanele Muholi. Maria Holtrop, at the time a curator in the Rijksmuseum's History department made it clear that the curatorial team "wanted to show the work of a (South African) woman, preferably of colour" (Holtrop, 2019). In spite of this, the Rijksmuseum board of directors chose the most "well-known" names on the list: Pieter Hugo and Marlene Dumas. This shows how the "hidden" hierarchies of power work within the museum to influence curatorial decision-making. As one exits the exhibition, there is a small display of placards (Figure 10) that the Rijksmuseum team collected from a #FeesMustFall protest that took place in 2016, when the team visited South Africa for research. Ignoring the ongoing conflict at South African universities would have been an irresponsible omission, and yet this display felt like a footnote enroute to the exit. The #FeesMustFall protests happened during the two years before the opening of *Goede Hoop*, and it feels as though an authentic engagement with this movement would have countered the narrative that the Rijksmuseum wanted to present to the Dutch (and international) European public.



## IMAGINED PASTS, REDEMPTIVE FUTURES

The curatorial statement on the Rijksmuseum website describes *Goede Hoop* as intending to explore “what took place between 1652 when Jan Van Riebeeck landed at the Cape and Mandela’s visit to Amsterdam in 1990.”<sup>5</sup> It framed the display as a showing of the historical “relationship” between South Africa and the Netherlands. Given the current wave of renewed interest in decolonial scholarship and practice in the museum sector, I understood the revisiting of the relationship between the two countries as a collaborative and critical undertaking. I imagined that curators of the Rijksmuseum would have worked with South African stakeholders such as IZIKO Museums of South Africa to tell the story of a shared and complex history. While there were some engagements (including visits by members of the *Goede Hoop* curatorial team to South Africa) between curators and management of the Rijksmuseum and curators at Iziko South African National Gallery (ISANG) in Cape Town, these did not materialise into a collaboration between the two institutions.

To the question of the Rijksmuseum’s engagement with ISANG, Maria Holtrop responded that consultations were held with IZIKO Museums through informal curatorial meetings. Holtrop offered the example of the team presenting the Rijksmuseum’s idea to begin the exhibition with a “sarcastic” comment about the Dutch arriving in an empty land when the first Dutch explorers encountered South Africa. IZIKO curators advised the Rijksmuseum of the problems with this as an opening statement and that it would likely be taken the wrong way. The museum heeded this advice. Though limited and informal, this exchange is an example of how an intentional and engaged dialogue with South African curators might have contributed to better understanding the embedded cultural nuances in showing the history of the two countries. Holtrop agrees with the critique that one of the failures of *Goede Hoop* is that there were no South African curators or researchers on the exhibition team. She feels this critique is “well

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<sup>5</sup> <https://vantilt.nl/boeken/good-hope/> [accessed 06/09/2018].

deserved” and says the museum has addressed this “blind spot” in the follow-up exhibition to *Goede Hoop*, on Dutch slave history. The museum has learned that they need to “organise diversity in their curatorial team on time”, and Holtrop seems confident that this has been addressed when she adds: “we now have a curator with Dutch-Caribbean roots” (Holtrop, 2019). However, she also responded that *Goede Hoop* was an exhibition on colonial history from a Dutch perspective, for a Dutch audience, and, that the curatorial team did not anticipate the international interest received for *Goede Hoop*.

While it was clear from the onset that the exhibition was designed for a Dutch audience, it is implausible that the Rijksmuseum did not anticipate the number of international visitors and interest that it received. The Rijksmuseum is among the most important cultural institutions in Europe and located in a city that attracts thousands of international visitors every year. Further, visitor statistics as recorded in the Rijksmuseum’s annual report for 2017 indicate that the museum was visited 2,148,304 times that year. The ratio between the national and international visit was 37% / 63% and estimated at 45% / 55% (Rijksmuseum, 2017: 254). In the 2017 annual report for the Institution, the museum states:

With its exhibitions, the Rijksmuseum aims to offer an international perspective on Dutch art and history and to address socially relevant themes such as slavery and religion. The Rijksmuseum wants to fulfill a social role in this: to initiate a dialogue by using art to make people think differently about certain themes, which is relevant in these times of fragmentation and polarisation. After the announcement that the Rijksmuseum will organise an exhibition on slavery in a few years’ time, the museum received many (almost exclusively positive) reactions from the public.

Good Hope can be mentioned as an example of an exhibition that puts the Netherlands in an international perspective: the first major exhibition about the relationship between South Africa and the Netherlands, four hundred years of eventful history in three hundred objects, mainly from South Africa.

The statement communicates the museum's vision of a future beyond being a museum for the art collections of the Netherlands and the History of the Golden Age. It also imagines itself becoming an institution that addresses the social issues of the contemporary. The shift in how it sees its societal role, could be a response to the heightened debates on decolonisation in museums.

Decolonisation is now on the agenda for museums in Europe and is increasingly the subject of museum presentations and exhibitions. The British Museum, UK (2016), the Africa Museum Tervuren, Belgium (2018) and the World Museum, Vienna (2018) are examples of large museums in Europe that have staged temporary exhibitions on colonialism and who are radically transforming colonial exhibits and redisplaying colonial collections. These interventions are entangled with the recent resurgence of calls from activist groups and governments in former colonial states to repatriate colonial-era objects in European museums to their communities of origin.

Extrapolating from the Rijksmuseum's annual report, it appears the museum is cognisant of itself as an institution connected to Dutch imperialism. Hence, it is figuring out ways to include a colonial interpretative narrative in its displays. The *Goede Hoop* exhibition was an essential step in addressing a past that is not openly acknowledged and spoken about in the Netherlands. However, the argument the exhibition makes is unclear and instead presents a simplistic and palatable take on colonialism for Dutch and other western audiences. Although European national exhibitions on colonialism can be read as an attempt at symbolic reparations to educate their publics, the exhibitions themselves often fail to do this by resorting to curatorial practices that reinforce inequitable power relations that erase or omit indigenous voices. *Goede Hoop's* fetishisation with the notion of a "shared" history or "special relationship" impedes a meaningful reckoning with the colonial past of the Netherlands and the Rijksmuseum. The museum promised radical intervention, but instead delivered a palatable representation of colonialism for an audience that does not extend beyond those it considers as white and European. In order to move towards a just

future for the museum sector in Europe, institutions like the Rijksmuseum need to reflect on what it would truly mean to “decolonise” their museal practices when developing strategic plans for the future. An important question should be: what is left behind in the permanent space of the Rijksmuseum when the temporary exhibitions addressing the Netherlands’ role in colonialism and slavery close?





*Berthold Franke*

## Representation and Reflection – Museums as Institutions and Their Double Identity

Translated by Judith Rosenthal

The museum, as we understand it today in its ideal-typical form, is an invention of modern Europe. More specifically, it is a product of the civil society that has emerged in Europe since the Renaissance and the advent of the modern era and, in widely differing lines of development and different locations, brought forth a set of institutions that have contributed decisively to shaping the cultural infrastructure of occidental societies. It was in the formation of these institutions that the transition from feudal to civil modes of societal organization took place. They accompanied the emergence of the modern nation state that took place in Europe – quite non-contemporaneously but nevertheless in a conjoining line – and ultimately also the restructuring of political rule from absolutist aristocratic systems to liberal democratic ones.

As institutions that proceeded from the collections of art and other treasures amassed by the courts and the aristocracy, the modern museums of the civil world played a prominent role in the modernization process outlined here only summarily. The history of the modern museum (another, possibly even more important institution is the university, which in some cases dates back to the thirteenth century) represents a chief component in the process of establishing European cultural modernity, which, owing to Europe's political reach from the sixteenth century onwards, would come to have a global impact.

Modern museums played their specific role as principal institutions of civil society in that they endowed the tasks they assumed from the old court collections – collecting, preserving, systematizing and exhibiting – with a new purpose for society. Unlike its forerunners, whose

chief *raison d'être* was to represent feudal power and courtly wealth, the modern museum became a place of knowledge. The aristocratic collections of art and rarities had served primarily as demonstrations of the splendour and omnipotence of dominion, and thus as aesthetic legitimations of the same. This echoed the practice – common since antiquity – of displaying the art and cult objects stolen in the course of victorious military campaigns. Yet already under absolutism, the functions of “rulership mirroring” and the “presence symbolism” associated with preservation were joined by another: the study, documentation and systematization of the bodies of knowledge that came along with the collected objects.<sup>1</sup>

The key to the scientific understanding of the culture, nature and history accumulated in the rapidly growing collections, archives and chambers of curiosities lies in the multiplicity and variety of the artefacts and natural and artistic objects of all kinds. To a degree otherwise achieved only by the large libraries, the transformation of what was initially a universal collection orientation into one of ever greater specialization (up until the very present, which has a museum for every field of knowledge and every phenomenon, from the “Cucumber Museum” in Lübbenau, Brandenburg to the “National Air and Space Museum” in Washington D.C.) mirrors the knowledge so rapidly accumulated in the modern era and the particularization of scientific faculties and disciplines in specific, sensorily perceivable and systematically researchable objects.

Even after the advent of this new phase in collecting and the ostentatious display of the objects collected, the element of “demonstrative consumption” (Thorstein Veblen) doubtless remained in place – to the very present – as the constantly growing number of major art temples bearing the names of potent patrons and collectors shows. Neverthe-

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<sup>1</sup> On this and the following subject, see: Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, “Schatzhaus, Wissensverkörperung und ‘Ewigkeitsort’”. In: Barbara Marx and Karl-Siegbert Rehberg (eds.): *Sammeln als Institution*. Munich and Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2006, pp. XI–XXXI. I am grateful to Karl-Siegbert Rehberg for his critical review of this text.



less, since the nineteenth century if not before, the emerging European civil culture has made a new and additional demand on these collections and their domiciles, the museums. They have transformed from treasure chambers into institutions of knowledge and education.

Knowledge and scholarship are the key elements of the civil programme of society's progress and self-awareness, as is vividly evident in the establishment of the practice of awarding academic titles at Europe's new universities. In deliberate opposition to the rank of aristocracy, acquired not through any merit but merely through birth, the civil society thus introduced the idea of an "ennoblement", earnable only by way of individual performance in the form of a scholarly and publicly verifiable work, and awarded as a lifelong affix to one's name, visible to all, only after the completion of a rigorous procedure. One is born as a count; the "Dr.", on the other hand, has to be earned, and not just anywhere but in scholarship. The new universities and museums thus institutionalized the sociohistorical success of European urban civil society and the resulting cultural and political self-awareness.

It was in a many-faceted process of institutional differentiation, bringing forth compulsory education, alphabetization, universities, libraries, archives, academies, theatres and public educational institutions of all kinds, that the cultural 'interior decoration' of the civil nation took shape – a nation that was serious about the preservation, development and dissemination of knowledge, scholarship and the achievements of civilization. Initially, of course, this was true only of the middle classes, the so-called third estate. Ultimately, however, the formation of the modern large territorial state and its egalitarian-democratic claim – manifest, for example in general compulsory education and compulsory military service – led to the inclusion of all of the state's subjects in this system. These subjects successively attained the status of citizens equal before the law and, in comparable manner, universities, libraries and museums established a central and – owing to their power of interpretation – fiercely contested arena for the struggle to define, construe and spread cultural identity. The museums as educational institutions had left aristocratic guardianship and come under the custody

of the middle classes, an ideal-typical case in point being the fate of the “mother” of all European museums, the Paris Louvre in the walls of the former royal palace. Their new function rendered them a public stage; the cultural imprint, acquirable in the museum in the form of an educational experience, was their institutional mission. Along with the universities, the modern museums thus became the leading cultural institutions responsible for defending and passing on the cultural canon that, in the new European nation states, was increasingly placed in a national framework.

The above-described process of institutionalization thus laid a double track for civil culture. Like the other institutions mentioned, the museum was, on the one hand, indebted to the great idea of the universal education and realization of the civil subject, his autonomy and his all-round abilities. To expose oneself to one’s traditional culture of origin by attending school and university, going to museums, the theatre and concerts and learning classical and foreign languages and a musical instrument, and thus to develop one’s personality so as ultimately to be in a position of making a contribution to society with one’s own achievements – this was one aspect of the model of civil ‘culturalization’, in which education is regarded as orientation for and formation of individual subjectivity. Since the Renaissance, it has been based on the idea of the autonomous subject capable of rational thought and action, the subject that refers reflexively to his origins and surroundings, is free to seek and find his place in the natural and social world and productively shapes that place. The reflexive mode – that is, the systematic, self-critical questioning of one’s own background and actions – is one of the main distinguishing features of European culture. Within this process, the critique of the traditions, conventions and knowledge of past eras is a leading motif that (in contrast to other great cultures of the world, a circumstance by all means worthy of discussion), again and again, proves to be a prime resource and driving force of cultural development. This is particularly evident in the key crystallization points of the history of thought, for example ancient Greek philosophy, the Christian monastic culture of the Middle Ages and then, naturally, the European Enlightenment and secularization.

Quite generally speaking, both elements are to be found in all cultures: traditionalism, convention and the persistence of the old on the one hand, and its questioning, critique and renewal on the other. For the development of Europe, it can be said that the element of critique played a special role. Critique ultimately triumphs to the extent that, in paradigmatic turning points of science and scholarship – for example the works of Kant, Darwin, Marx and Freud – it deciphers the evolutionary structure of knowledge, society, nature and the individual, thus exposing the process of culture as such and escaping ideological domination by the feudal state and totalitarian religion once and for all. Within the above-outlined institutionalization of the civil society, this process led to a new mission: institutions were to serve not only the organization of rule, but also the reflexive examination of societal progress. This is perhaps most evident in the formation of the modern constitutional state and, as already discussed, in the institution known as the museum.<sup>2</sup>

The museums' new *raison d'être*, which conceives of education (and thus of culture) as a reflexive opening of perspectives and a process of searching and questioning, did not simply replace the old representative one; rather, from now on the two existed side by side. This is a manifestation of a double model, no less, still valid today, of culturalization in the modern society, a model which, in a series of recent publications, the sociologist Andreas Reckwitz has subsumed under the terms "hyperculture" and "cultural essentialism". His analysis sheds light on a cultural struggle carried out on a global scale in a wide range of co-existences and conflicts. Underlying this struggle are two diametrically opposed models of culturalization. There is, on the one hand, the principle of a "hybrid" culture that, combining many actively chosen sources, is borne by the new, cosmopolitan "creative middle class" and to be understood as fluid, universally oriented and purely processual in nature. On the other hand, there is the "essentialist" conception of the identitarian culture as a fund of orientations, value crystallizations

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<sup>2</sup> On the role of the constitutional state in modern Europe, see Jürgen Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1992.

and traditions distinct from other often ethnically or nationally defined cultures – a culture of the kind that dominates the old middle classes and less-privileged strata of society.<sup>3</sup>

It is not difficult to apply this terminology to the history of modern Europe's culture institutions. After all, apart from the above-described role of museums as places of “hypercultural” education and reflection, they also, by virtue of their origins, fulfilled the “cultural essentialist” function of establishing and consolidating tradition and identity. In this conception, the museum serves the purpose of normalizing and preserving the cultural identity objectified and canonized by the collection, the cultural identity in which the members of the collective – whether social class or nation – are assimilated.<sup>4</sup> The individual elements of this type of group identity are accordingly meant to stabilize the members of a collective by distinguishing them – conservatively or aggressively, as the case may be – from all who do not partake in the collective and have a different set of cultural achievements to call their own. Naturally, the sphere in which this game of cultural closure, this claim of the “own” in defence against the “other” played out for the most part in Early Modern Europe was religion, in which both within and outside the Christian spectrum, and above all in rivalry with the neighbouring Oriental Islam, cultural disputes were carried out over generations and are still being carried out today.

What is decisive for our contemplation of the museum is that, from the time of its emergence, it has been characterized by its double function: as an institution of cultural opening and closure at the same time.<sup>5</sup> To this day, it continues to play its role as part of a civil public that conceives of art and cultural as principal elements of the communicative

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<sup>3</sup> See Andreas Reckwitz, *Das Ende der Illusionen: Politik, Ökonomie und Kultur in der Spätmoderne*. Berlin: Suhrkamp 2019, pp. 29–61.

<sup>4</sup> One of the classical European culture and education institutions bears the indicative title “conservatory”.

<sup>5</sup> On this subject, see Pierre Bourdieu/Alain Darbel: *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public*. Cambridge, UK/Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013 (original French 1966).

self-conception of a society that, if imperfect, is humane and liberal, and that regards libraries, theatre, universities, academies and museums as arenas of critical exchange, discourse and mutual enrichment, visited and attended by learning individuals willing to acknowledge difference. At the same time, however, these venues also continue to be instrumentalized as agencies of identitarian interests, political rule and the nationalist display of power with whose aid particularly the young, post-feudalist nation states reaffirm their identities and arm themselves symbolically and ideologically. It was not long after the attainment of state sovereignty that the great majority of European countries had a whole slew of institutions all entrusted with a national mission – national theatres, national libraries, national academies, national galleries and national museums – which fulfilled this mission now in a more paternalistic, now in a more chauvinistic manner, as the case may be.

After the manner of the two-fold conception of enculturation that comes to light in the German terms “*Bildung*” (education, formation) and “*Erziehung*” (upbringing, breeding), the museums always merit understanding as the bearers of a double mission. On the one hand they function as institutions of “*Bildung*” in which, by way of active, creative exploration of the legacy, people are cultivated to be free and sovereign subjects. And on the other hand, they are places of “*Erziehung*” in which these subjects are initiated and assimilated into a common cultural whole, which they are then expected to perpetuate, defend and augment almost in the manner of an objective “*acquis*”. Evident in the history of European culture from the start, this dialectic still exists today. It took on especially vivid and fatal form in the age of imperialism, in which the European states – by virtue of their technological-military superiority and explorative socio-economic aggressivity – acceded to world domination. In the process, they managed to make the features of their cultural infrastructure a worldwide standard that would ultimately also have considerable influence on the institutional landscape of the countries they colonized. Previously, however, in celebration of their world success, the colonial powers would build museums for the presentation of “*exoticized*” showpieces and treasures

stolen from those foreign lands as demonstration of their power and proof of their superiority.

An integral aspect of the history of Europe's ethnological collections is doubtless the motif of gaining access to, learning about and preserving foreign cultures. All told, however, it was part of a process of aggressive colonial "appropriation", to use this rather belittling term, and offers what is probably the best example of the museum's abovementioned aggressive identity-defining function. To this day, it sends shivers down our spines to look at the collections and museums established from the last third of the nineteenth century onwards, but also the many actions and "ethnological expositions" in which, in settings such as zoos, fun-fairs or trade fairs, human beings, animals and objects from the far-away colonies were paraded before amazed audiences. These were the origins of what more sensitive observers called attention to – already early on and ever more vehemently after the political decolonialization – as a racialistically tinged "ethnological perspective" on artefacts and entire cultures. And to this day, Europe's many ethnological collections have not managed to recover from what was, from the start, a literally zoological exhibition of the "primitive", "exotic" cultures of the brutally conquered, oppressed and exploited colonies. At best, these museums have taken initial steps towards new legitimation by addressing themselves to their own origins.

The critical reassessment of the history of the ethnological museums and collections started late and has yet to be carried to completion. Not yet having thoroughly revised their programmes of cultural supremacy and racialistically founded exoticism, these institutions are still under the shadow of colonial violence. Such in-depth re-examination, however, would contribute significantly to the dialectic on European cultural modernity by exposing the chauvinistic tendencies it has possessed from the beginning.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A representative case in point is the "Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale" in Tervuren outside of Brussels that, until its reopening in 2018, presented an utterly provocative example of unbroken colonialist mentality. Already its holdings of thousands of hunting trophies alone – kept in archives that were

Traces of the museum's double-edged role are also still evident in the former colonial countries that, after long periods of political, economic and cultural oppression, finally won their national independence and cultural self-awareness in arduous processes. This is due in part to the fact that, as already established at the start of this text, these countries inherited a more or less complete set of cultural institutions after the model of their onetime 'masters'. What is more, the young ex-colonial states freshly "released" into independence (to quote a telling European convention of speech), having emerged, for the most part, from arbitrary boundary demarcations by the former colonial powers (at the "Berlin Congo Conference" of 1884/85), were extremely hybrid culturally, still dependent economically and exceedingly fragile politically. In their search for consolidation, it was not by chance that they fell back on the European-style cultural institutions that had been paternalistically imposed upon them.

The history of the National Museum of India in New Delhi is an especially instructive example. Its holdings go back to an exhibition of Indian art planned before the country gained independence and made up of objects selected by the Royal Academy in London. The show was on view in the London galleries of the Burlington House in the winter months of 1947–48 and then, in 1949, in the Rashtrapati Bhavan, the house of the president of the young Indian republic, which just a short time earlier had been the palace of the viceroy of the British crown. To be precise, the excellent collection of the Indian National Museum, which did not receive its own building until 1960, is based on a still highly significant stock of artefacts selected by the former colonial power – quite a curiosity in view of post-colonial India's marked cultural self-awareness. There is biting irony in the circumstance that an eminent institution appointed to serve as the national museum of India be fundamentally based on an exhibition mirroring the perspective of

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opened to the public before the renovation work began – painted a disturbing, if highly significant, picture. On the history of (not only) Belgian colonialism, see David van Reybrouck, *Congo: The Epic History of a People*. New York: Harper Collins, 2015.

the former colonial power on what had previously been its greatest 'possession'. It is not known whether or to what degree the Hindu nationalist campaigners for true Indian cultural identity now in power are aware of that irony. At any rate, the unbiased museum visitor does not learn anything more specific about these matters during a normal visit.

In the post-colonial context, the museums are indisputably as much the arenas of the struggle over the prerogative of cultural interpretation as before. Whoever has the power over education, the universities and the museums potentially also has a hold on the cultural identity of the collective. That is why, once they have taken charge of key institutions, the justice system and the media and brought them in line with their ideology, the next thing authoritarian demagogic and nationalistic regimes set their sights on is education, culture and their symbolic venues, first and foremost the museums. In present-day Europe, this tendency is particularly dramatic in Poland, where the current government is pursuing its history- and art-policy objectives by means of direct intervention in, for example, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk, and the Museum of Contemporary Art (Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej) in Warsaw. And not only there but all over the world, wherever the powers that be make sole claim to the interpretation of history and culture, it is not long before their best friends are put in charge of the respective institutions.<sup>7</sup>

The breadth and historical impact of the struggle over cultural hegemony, self-determination and collective identity is especially striking in the context of the debate over the future of the collections containing

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<sup>7</sup> Even before they commission museums for this purpose, authoritarian nationalists are particularly fond of pursuing their cultural and historical missions in the form of monument projects. Good examples of this approach are the "Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation" installed by the Hungarian government in 2014 and the colossal statue of the national hero and Gandhi's comrade Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel dedicated by the Prime Minister of India, Modi, in 2018.



objects from the ex-colonies, above all in museums in Europe and the USA – a debate still contaminated to this day by the moral burden of the colonialist crimes against humanity. When the historians, museologists and museum people from the former colonial powers meet with their colleagues from the former colonies, it should be added, their concern (apart from tangible material interests) is not merely with making at least symbolic amends for historical guilt in the form of restitution or fair critical reassessment and research from multiple perspectives.

Aside from these main issues – of provenance, the return of the stolen artefacts and the organization of the accompanying learning process in such a way as to be as productive as possible for all involved in many of the constellations in which European and African experts participate with very different resources at their disposal – another problem frequently also makes itself felt: the ongoing institutional asymmetry between the players of the two continents, a consequence of the historical colonial imbalance of power.<sup>8</sup> It is thus no wonder that hardly any of these exchanges end without the conclusion or accusation of retrograde paternalism or post-colonial arrogance, or the telling standstill that comes about, for example, when the call for the restitution of stolen objects is countered – even by voices in the countries of origin – with a reference to the insufficient conservatorial and museological infrastructure in those countries.

It must be assumed that a description of colonialism can only be viable if it takes the psychocultural dimension into account – an aspect that far exceeds the temporal bounds of the historical epoch of Imperialism. In the wake of Frantz Fanon's seminal studies, this dimension can be described as the humiliating experience of self-alienation, backwardness and the corresponding adulatory "identification with the aggressor" (Anna Freud) vis-à-vis the superior subjugating power. The dichotomies between imitation and rejection, rebellion and adaptation

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<sup>8</sup> On the restitution debate, see Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*. November 2018: [http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr\\_savoy\\_en.pdf](http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf) (accessed 11 May 2020).

constitutive for the colonial experience are manifest not only in the outward struggle with the superior power, but also in the form of subjective internalization. What this means with regard to the matter of how to organize the cultural infrastructure in the former colonies is that a return of this disposition cannot be precluded. In the museum context, for example, it can be expressed in the question of where the restituted collections should go in the future, if not to museums designed after the European example and merely located in different, non-European places.

The crux of this process may indeed be that the struggle for the acknowledgement of historical guilt and cultural self-determination – manifest in our context in the debate over museological provenance and restitution – boils down to the verbatim replication of European institutions as destinations for the restituted objects, possibly even under the direction of European specialists and financed by their money.<sup>9</sup> This is more than just ironic. At any rate, the emotionality connected with the struggle over this difficult matter, and the ever-recurring misunderstandings and confrontations with the ongoing sense of frustration and humiliation fed by rage and disappointment appear from the outside to be difficult to shake. And they point to the persistence of the colonial constellation: those caught in the self-contradiction of the former subjects on the one hand, and those engaged in the continuity of the subjugation – whether out of naivete or cynicism – on the other.

An interesting parallel to this complex, and a testimony to the valence of such socio-psychological constellations, is found in a context historically and geographically untouched by post-colonialism, and described in the insightful politological, contemporary-historical study by Ivan Krastev and Steven Holmes about the decline of liberal democracies in Central Eastern Europe, Russia and the USA.<sup>10</sup> As the key cause

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<sup>9</sup> “So, comrades, let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions (sic!), and societies, which draw their inspirations from her.” Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), New York: Grove Press, 2004, p. 239.

<sup>10</sup> See Ivan Krastev/Stephen Holmes, *The Light That Failed : Why the West*

of the current success of authoritarian-nationalistic movements and regimes in those regions (and not only there), they identify a “counter-revolutionary” syndrome that, impelled by embitterment and rage, can be understood as a reaction to the post-1989 pressure to “imitate” the Western liberal model for which there appeared at the time to be “no alternative”.<sup>11</sup> What proves to be especially fatal here is that, for very many people, the promise of prosperity suggested by the Western model that was initially emulated with great enthusiasm has not been fulfilled in the least (a phenomenon particularly palpable since the 2008/2009 financial crisis) because, apart from the freedoms of democracy, the liberalism package also contained the imperative of neoliberally unleashed global capitalism, complete with all the inequalities it engenders. In the Krastev/Holmes analysis, the heteronomous character of the process, in which progress in the quest for the “imitation” of liberalism is also organized and controlled by the very objects of that imitation, proves to a particularly humiliating aspect, and the factor ultimately permitting the cynical rampages by authoritarian representatives of illiberal democracies such as Orban, Putin and Trump. The parallels are obvious: what triggered a kind of post-colonial syndrome and the subsequent anti-democratic revolts at the polls was evidently a “liberal colonization” – whether of the young post-communist democ-

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*Is Losing the Fight for Democracy*. New York/London: Pegasus Books, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> “From the perspective of the white man, the black man appears inferior, while the white man, conversely, with his ‘achievements’ – civilization, culture, in short: intellect – is *worthy of imitation*.” (italics added). Frantz Fanon: *Schwarze Haut, Weiße Masken*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1985, p. 42, here trans. from the German by Judith Rosenthal. The book exists in English as *Black Skin, White Masks*. Another good source of material on the supposition of such “imitative” colonization within a country is the inner-German art debate over what artists and experts from East Germany deplore as the discrimination of East German art in museum and gallery collection and exhibition practices dominated by West German top-level personnel. See Karl-Siegbert Rehberg/Paul Kaiser (eds.): *Bilderstreit und Gesellschaftsumbruch: Die Debatten um die Kunst aus der DDR im Prozess der deutschen Wiedervereinigung*. Berlin/Kassel: Siebenhaar, 2013.

racies of Central Eastern Europe or post-Soviet Russia, or of the old, white middle classes of the United States of America.

The point here is by no means to overdramatize the above-described structural parallel between colonial subjugation and institutional “imitation”. It may exhibit a certain plausibility with regard to the emotional aspects of the provenance and restitution debate, but it is not particularly helpful in finding an answer to the fundamental question of the museum of the future. Perhaps it is best, therefore, to adopt a pragmatic approach, according to which institutions must justify their benefit and their mission as called for by their specific location and historical background. Imitation is not only submission, but, depending on the situation, can also be a highly efficient cultural technique. And if people, no matter where, think institutions invented in Europe, for example the museum, are “worthy of imitation”, then they should by all means go ahead and imitate them.

If we proceed on the assumption that the history and present of the museum are shaped by the above-described double character of its preserving, assimilating, representative function on the one hand and its perspective-opening, educating, reflexive function on the other, then a comparison of the working modes of typical Western museums over the past decades reveals a clear shift from the classical, identitarian, canonizing paradigm to the new, internationally contrasting and relativizing one. This is particularly evident in the new practice of an ever-accelerating carousel of exhibition and cooperation projects that have proven capable of activating ever greater resources and venues on all continents (with the familiar side effects of the new profit- and sensation-driven franchise and event business taking place in glamorous museum palaces). In many younger nations, including the former colonies, this is still very often contrasted by institutions that are paternalistically controlled by rigid government authorities and forced to adhere rigorously to their state- and identity-strengthening mission. Ultimately, therefore, there are two ideal-typical forms of national museums: those that work nationally in fulfilment of their national mission, and those that work internationally with the same intention.

And it is precisely here – in the pursuit of the open, reflexive tradition and shelving of the identitarian, shuttered one – that a means of finding alternatives and solutions begins to take shape, both in the post-colonial contexts and in the struggle with authoritarian, nationalistic appropriation tendencies in the museums. The best contributions to the restitution debate have always sought to conceive of the history represented by the objects of ethnological collections as a common mission, to be examined, conveyed and made universally accessible in a process of mutual cooperation. The multiperspectival reconstruction of original contexts and cultural meanings as well as the history of the often violent appropriation and the museological fates of the objects to be restituted would thus become the principle method for the critical reappraisal of both the cultural history of the countries of origin as well as the history of dominance and violence in the colonial period, a method bringing together institutions, experts and publics in both places. This would be an essentially anti-identitarian and reflexive form of museum practice that, at the same time, points far beyond the realm of collections with colonial backgrounds and might represent the definition of guidelines for the work of the “museum of the future”.

By committing themselves to the critical reconstruction of the history of their collections and objects and, rather than defining their goal as the defence of their one own canon, participating in the contrastive narrative of the plurality and fluidity of the many canons – a narrative shaped by contradictions and transitions – museums will transform from strongrooms and citadels into interfaces and exchanges of culture and platforms for a mode of education that encourages both self-criticism and self-awareness and follows through with the fundamental realization that the “own” becomes perceivable only in knowledge of and exchange with the “other” and different. The impulse towards identitarian self-assurance is by all means understandable in its underlying motive. In the process proposed here, however, it can come into its own on a higher level, as it were, where identity is no longer regarded as a firmly outlined possession, but as a communicative process of enrichment through variety and choice. These ideas evoke visions of a future museum landscape in the form of a global network

of institutions engaging in joint research, sharing and exchange, and presenting their treasures in comparative and contrastive constellations and surprising contexts.

As the European example shows, institutions emerge from social movements and their cultural or political aims. Once they have become institutions, their originally progressive – in some cases even revolutionary – mission recedes ever further into the background. After playing their role as pioneering agencies of the new, they successively become part of the status quo, and, as time goes on, a phalanx of defence, until being ultimately replaced by new social movements and institutions. Museums are distinguished by a fundamental focus on the past, inherited along with the artefacts and objects that have come to them through their genuine responsibility to collect, preserve and interpret. This makes them especially susceptible to the structural conservatism of the institution in general. Generations of visitors channelled more or less voluntarily through traditional museums with their encyclopaedic concatenations of mute objects that have been robbed of their communicative power can attest to this. The paradox, dialectical, institutional double character of the museum – however one might choose to describe it – lies in the constructive contradiction between its inherent penchant for petrification and perpetuation on the one hand, and the task of constantly questioning and reliquefying culture on the other. The most famous theorist of bourgeois society lent this idea expression in the unrivalled statement: “These petrified conditions must be made to dance by singing to them their own melody!”<sup>12</sup> Is there any better way to describe the mission of the “museum of the future”?

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, ed. Joseph O'Malley, Cambridge 2009, p. 134.

*Tasneem Zakaria Mehta*

## Reinventing a Colonial Institution for Contemporary India

In the museum landscape of India, the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum is an unusual example. Opened to the public in 1857 as the Victoria and Albert Museum, it is Mumbai's (erstwhile Bombay) oldest museum with an eclectic collection that reflects changing curatorial intentions and historic circumstances.

The BDL Museum, as it is now popularly known, is owned by the local government, the Municipal Corporation of Mumbai, but run by an autonomous Trust created through a Public-Private Partnership in 2003, the first in India for a cultural institution. The Museum was in a highly dilapidated condition and the story of its restitution is without precedent in India. The Mumbai Chapter of INTACH, the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage which is the foremost cultural conservation organisation in India, conceptualised and executed the project.<sup>1</sup> It included not only the restoration of the building and its surroundings, but also the revitalisation of the institution. The revival of the Museum also attempted to change existing paradigms of museum display, exhibitions and education programming. The project shifted the horizon of what a museum should be and its role for communities in India. To understand its implications and impact on museums in the country as a reference of how we might conceptualise a 'Museum of the Future', we need to understand the evolution of the project.

The principal donor, the Jammalal Bajaj Foundation, is owned by one of India's foremost business families, the Bajaj Group, who have had a long time commitment to public philanthropy and had a close associ-

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<sup>1</sup> I was Convenor of the INTACH Mumbai chapter and both conceptualised and led the project. I became Vice Chairman of the national organisation in 2010 till 2017.

ation with Mahatma Gandhi. One of the conditions of the donors was that the newly created Museum Trust should be given autonomy to enable it to function effectively. However the government insisted that they would retain the veto vote on the board. The success of the project therefore depended on public and political perceptions. It involved convincing stakeholders with varying backgrounds, interests and intentions to support the project and the activities. This involved numerous challenges, some that are peculiar to our institution and some that public institutions across the world encounter.

The Trust has a board of experts and for about two-thirds of the duration of the 'Agreement', which was for 15 years from when the restoration and revitalisation was completed, the Municipal Corporation and the politicians and bureaucrats who run it, have been supportive of the project. We have been able to achieve and initiate what no other public museum in India had done until then, which was to provide a consistent platform for both modern and contemporary art and culture, even as the Museum's permanent collection was recontextualised and revitalised. The programming includes solo exhibitions by contemporary artists, a film forum, video art screenings, music and dance performances, international exhibitions, seminars, an intensive outreach and education programme, exhibition publications and a year-long post graduate diploma in Modern and Contemporary Art.

It took five years to completely restore the Museum building as well as 3000 objects from the collection for which we won Unesco's 2005 Asia Pacific Award of Excellence for Cultural Conservation, the highest award in the field. Culture was never very high on the government's agenda especially in Mumbai which has always been seen as the financial and industrial capital of the nation, while Delhi with its ancient archaeological glories and state museums was perceived as the cultural centre. Once we received the Unesco award, in the early period, there was little interference with our programme which was progressive and aimed to challenge audience perceptions.

Museums, in India, had always been perceived as dowdy, dreary places which, as an official once said to me were perceived as 'graveyards



for objects'. We wanted to change this stereotype of what a typical museum was then and to some extent is still the case in parts of India. We sought to engage audiences, through art and culture, in a conversation not just about our heritage but also about contemporary social circumstances in ways that was inclusive and discursive. In the late 1990s and early 21st century when the project began, dialogues and debates about modern and contemporary art and culture were few and far between in the limited fora for cultural exchange of the time.<sup>2</sup>

It was therefore daunting to reinvent a colonial museum and *represent* it as an early modern museum (and not just as a typically ethnographic colonial institution) with the intention to engage these histories with the contemporary cultural field.<sup>3</sup> The design and display of the restored museum consciously evoked the original 19th century aura of early museums. We tried to create the sense of an “*ajajib ghar*” or “*wonder house*” as museums were called in local parlance, a word which has its origins in the 19th century but is still used by the local population. We envisioned the Museum as a space of enchantment that would draw visitors, because of its spectacular architecture and interiors, as due to its dilapidated condition it had been mostly forgotten by the people of Mumbai. We wanted to create a space where you can suspend belief

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<sup>2</sup> I was involved with institutions like the National Gallery of Modern Art in Mumbai since its inception in 1997 till 2014, and felt that the lack of institutional support for young as well as established artists was a great lacuna in the city's cultural milieu. The central government under whose auspices the NGMA operates was interested in “Modern Art” which was essentially the art of pre-Independence India, Amrita Sher-Gil and the Bengal School for example. Those were safe subjects to navigate. Much later, after protests by the artists community, contemporary art was included in the exhibition agenda. Further, most museums in the country did not mount special exhibitions or possess a conservation laboratory or if they did the people who manned it were often poorly trained.

<sup>3</sup> My own interests and background are in fine arts and design, art history, political philosophy and literature, and I was passionate about museums having worked as a docent at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, during my student days.

and let the imagination take over, and yet at the same time question received wisdom and learn new things.

In its original conception in the 19th century, the BDL Museum was intended as an encyclopaedic institution with a strong focus on artistic innovation to encourage trade. Its collection, similar to curiosity cabinets of the time, included natural history and geological specimens as well as gifts and archaeological finds. Later this expanded to include beautifully crafted dioramas and models that highlighted the life and culture of India in the 19th century; paintings, rare books, manuscripts, textiles and an extraordinary collection of decorative arts executed in an early modernist style.

Curatorial intentions changed over the years but the Museum was always a place to showcase artistic experimentation, whether in art, architecture or design. Early examples of this are the various experiments in the design of traditional artefacts to suit European tastes like the Bombay School Pottery and Bombay School of Painting. The building itself is one of the few examples of Palladian design in the city. The position of the Superintendent of the Sir J. J. School of Art and the Curator of the Museum were held by the same person for over 100 years and this greatly influenced collecting policies. Many of the objects housed in the Museum were made by master craftsmen at the Sir J.J. School of Art, who had been employed to teach their skills to the students, adapting traditional techniques with modernist concepts of form and design.

Cecil Burns, curator at the Museum from 1903 to 1918, for example, embarked on a programme to document the 'native' communities of Bombay and India and this resulted in a unique and comprehensive collection of models and dioramas in the Company style that document life in the India in the 19th and early 20th centuries. However over the years this collection had got jumbled up and relegated to small cases at the rear of the upper floor and labelled as 'costumes of India'. I re-curated this wonderful collection for more important political objectives which was to show the great diversity of India and the extraordinary cosmopolitan traditions of this city. We believed that while it

was important to explore this large canvas for research and educational purposes, it was equally important to interrogate the institution's history and practice and reflect contemporary cultural practices and artistic endeavours.

Every object's artistic quality and its history, its mode of display and the curatorial intention both historic and current has been considered in the layout. We privileged the subaltern point of view. At the centre of this endeavour was the intention to give primacy to the Indian artist and craftsperson, who were responsible for the building and the objects but who had been denied recognition during colonial times. The models of the craftsmen who made the objects were presented as central to each vitrine display. They had remained anonymous and rarely acknowledged in the colonial period, an unfortunate practice that has only recently changed. They were given pride of place and our labels and research emphasised this. The interactives that we have planned for the Museum going forward will also emphasize the craftsperson and the process and the making of the object.<sup>4</sup>

A similar attention to both the historic intention and how we might interpret the content and the objects in the light of new research and our post-independence and post-colonial position has guided the curatorial mandate for the museum's contemporary art exhibitions and education programmes. Central to the programme has been the idea of destabilising notions of identity and dismantling the structures of knowledge upon which the Museum was grounded, while at the same time working within the ambit of its original intentions of experimentation and discovery. The objective was to engage audiences in a dialogue about difficult subjects and to make the Museum a place where people could see things from a different perspective and enlarge their vision.

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<sup>4</sup> Our accession registers give very limited information about the provenance of the objects. usually a line about when it was acquired and how much it cost. Even our archives have limited information and we have spent much time scouring international exhibition lists and other documents trying to research where and how the objects came to the Museum.

In 2009 when we started our exhibitions programme, a year after the museum opened post restoration, I chose what I believed was a fairly innocuous title for a very radical programme to convince our board that the programme was within the remit of our mission statement. Our contemporary exhibitions programme, is the Trojan horse in the Museum, but it carries the anodyne title “Engaging Traditions”. Not a title I would ordinarily have chosen to showcase our most important exhibition programme, which invites artists to present a solo show throughout the Museum, making interventions and changing displays in a dialogue with the museum and the city’s history. Carrying stakeholders in a public project is, however, not an easy task and one learns quickly when doing such projects that a nuanced and layered approach needs to be employed. On the one hand it is important for experts to retain control of the Museum’s cultural focus, on the other hand we are dependent on state and private funding and therefore are required to address the concerns of these constituencies. Governments, and this is true for many institutions and museums across the world, most often are more comfortable with non-controversial, conventional programming. It therefore requires political skills, careful negotiation and ingenuity to accomplish a progressive programming.

We invited artists whose practice reflected this effort to push the boundaries of what is known about the past, the present and the future, to present their work at the Museum. And to ensure that our stakeholders did not think we were crossing the line we did intensive research to demonstrate the connections with the Museum collection. The invited artists are encouraged to interrogate and research the collections and challenge conventional assumptions about what art is and what is its social function. Artists can intervene in existing Museum displays, juxtapose their works with particular objects, use objects as part of their art works and even in some cases reorganise the existing order of display or change the visual perception of the place.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For example, we presented an exhibition with the artist duo ‘Camp’ which involved changing our entrance atrium into a simulated movie theatre, with

The first exhibition was in collaboration with Pukar, called ‘Girangaon Kal, Aaj aur Kal’ (‘Girangaon Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow’). Pukar is an organisation established to document the labour movement in Mumbai. Girangaon is the local name for the Mill lands. The Museum abuts this area and we were keen to engage with our neighbourhood first. Like many 19th century museums in India, the BDL Museum is located in the environs of a botanical garden and the zoo in what was originally the elite neighbourhood of Byculla but has since become dilapidated and very congested. With the industrial development of Mumbai in the latter half of the 19th century as a textile spinning and weaving hub, the neighbourhood transformed into a working class area that spawned the early labour movement in Mumbai. The area is remarkable for its diversity and its many landmark buildings including several imposing mills, alongside the famous chawls or working class housing created for the mill workers. We held seminars and talks with many of the labour movement leaders and showed a film on the movement’s history. Since then we have also embarked on creating an intangible heritage archive of our immediate neighbourhood. We have recorded most of the neighbourhood establishments and interviewed the owners. Many exist for more than a century and are likely to be demolished as the area rapidly gentrifies. We have tried to find old craft and artist ateliers, photography studios etc. We plan to collaborate with scholars on a family album archive to build a contemporary post-colonial version of our model collection.

Our first contemporary art exhibition was with the artist Nikhil Chopra in 2010 in collaboration with Chatterjee and Lal Gallery. Most of our programming, both exhibition and education, is collaborative to encourage a broader range of engagement and participation. Chopra dressed as an imperial British Queen and walked through the Museum. In the upper rooms we displayed photographs of his pilgrimage through Mumbai/Bombay to get to the Museum and the different personas he adopted for this particular performance including the orig-

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seating for about a hundred people, and a huge screen on which their video was shown as if in a cinema.

inal one as the artist Sir Raja. We invited an art historian, who is fluent in the local language Marathi, to engage with the local audience and to explain the exhibition. The audience was intrigued and mesmerised by the performance.

Another early exhibition in 2010 which challenged existing paradigms of display was Sudarshan Shetty's tour de force, "This Too Shall Pass". Shetty's works were spread across the Museum breaking down the white cube format through which audiences were used to viewing contemporary art. It was the first time that a contemporary artist's work had been shown in juxtaposition with traditional art works in a 19th century museum. Each solo exhibition of both established and emerging artists opened new pathways to not only interpret the Museum's collection but has simultaneously created new readings of the artist's practice.

In addition we have hosted several important international exhibitions in collaboration with museums from across the world, as well as supported local galleries, foundations, non-governmental organisations working with art and communities, and both local and international curators, to present a range of exhibitions and programmes.

There is a misperception in government and business circles that contemporary art or any art for that matter is an elitist preoccupation, and therefore culture gets short shrift in state budget allocations. Our experience has revealed otherwise that the most actively engaged audiences are those who have never been exposed to contemporary art as sadly much of it is locked away behind private gallery walls, where local people do not have the opportunity to venture. Many of the visitors to the Museum are from its surrounding neighborhoods or are local tourists. As the Museum slowly gained recognition in the city the visitor demographic changed to include students, the middle class and international tourists. It has now become a destination visit and is also very popular with the city's youth.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> We have also maintained a ticket price of Rs. 10 from the start to enable wide access. For a small Museum our footfall on weekends especially is chal-



*Yog Raj Chitrakar, Memory Drawing X, by Nikhil Chopra, Performance by the artist as Queen, 2010, Image courtesy: Dr. BDL Museum*

As a member of several government committees on museums, I have recommended to the government that instead of erecting new museum buildings dedicated exclusively to modern and contemporary art, a long term project fraught with politics, spaces in our extraordinary classical museums can be repurposed to create new galleries for contemporary art. Thoughtfully curated interventions by contemporary artists among classical art objects, as we have demonstrated can be done, and should be encouraged to energise museums and bring in the youth. India's youth form the largest segment of her 1.2 billion population. There is now a huge appetite for innovation and engaging with contemporary art has become more than just a leisure pastime for many. In fact,

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lenging and we can receive between 3000 to 4000 people a day. Our programming has therefore been mindful of this. All our curatorial walks and labelling etc. are done in 3 languages. We have devised special programmes for our Marathi speaking audiences which have become extremely popular. Our weekly newsletter goes out in both English and Marathi. Our efforts have been to make the Museum welcoming and accessible space for people from all communities and of all ages.

because of the development of the art market in recent years in India and the attention of the media to art and artists, being an artist is no longer looked upon askance as it was in earlier decades in India.

Now more than ever, the idea of what museums should be is important, as we stand at the threshold of massive changes through technology and communication. As we go forward into a world driven by algorithms, into a social space where the real and the virtual merge, we need spaces that can be comforting and safe yet at the same time provocative. If I were to imagine an ideal museum for the future, I would propose many of the practices we have instituted at the BDL Museum shared in this essay. If the practicality of funding were not an issue, I would attach a research institution dedicated to the arts to the Museum which would become the archive for artist residencies and the other creative programmes. The institute would encourage curatorial as well as academic research on a range of issues and object histories. The idea would be to create a knowledge bank on Indian art and culture from the 18th century to the contemporary period (that is specifically for the BDL Museum but it could vary for other institutions).

I would have artists in residence whose practice could be observed by the public and where regular dialogues regarding ideas and techniques would be possible. I would invite crafts people and designers to work together to expand innovation through the use of traditional skills. I would hugely expand the educational remit of the museum with specialised courses, seminars, conferences, publications etc. The ideal museum would have several exhibition spaces that allow for exploring the full range of the visual arts from film and photography to design and fashion as well as food. And I would bring in the voices of the people by inviting them to contribute ideas about the activities of the Museum.

Museums can be intimidating or boring places for people not engaged with culture and every effort should be made to ensure that once the visitor enters the museum the experience is friendly and easily accessible. Large crowds detract from the visitor experience and a staggered entry system can ensure a more enjoyable experience. Unfortunately





*This Too Shall Pass, by Sudarshan Shetty, Untitled, Teak wood, motor mechanical device, 2010, Image courtesy: Dr. BDL Museum*

criteria for funding for both government and donors is often dependant on footfall and this needs to change. I also believe that the vast collections lying in storage should be opened up for the visitor to experience. Open storage systems as well as conservation facilities should be accessible to visitors. Care of collections is of the greatest importance and opening these locked doors will enable a deeper and richer understanding and engagement with artworks.

A perfect museum must have lots of spaces for relaxation and conversation, so cafes and restaurants as well as shops that showcase the amazing variety of Indian crafts would be essential. I would create a technology hub where you could choose your favourite object from the museum and we could 3D print a memento for you while you wandered around the exhibits. You could experience an Augmented Reality walkthrough of a 19th century market in Mumbai where you would see all the wonderful models that we have on display come alive as if they were real people, and perhaps you might even be able to have a conversation with them about what Mumbai was like then. Perhaps



*Untitled (Cobweb/Crossings), by Reena Kallat/ ZegnArt Public / India,  
Painted sculptural installation in FRP, metal, 2013, Image courtesy:  
Dr. BDL Museum*

you might find a bit of local gossip to entertain you on this journey into the past as well as the future.

I would invite contemporary artists to re-interpret our history and transgress boundaries. At present most museums in India present both historical and modern collections in a structured chronological format. We need to mix up collections based on themes, on ideas, on a differently configured visual and intellectual syntax. We may choose to adhere to a historical time line in one exhibition and skew it another allowing for a variety of perspectives.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> We had planned all of this in our proposal for a new building that was submitted and approved in 2013 to the Board of Trustees. In 2014 December after working two years on the project with a well-known museum consultant, we held an international competition for which we received 104 submissions. Most of the world's eminent architects indicated an interest to participate. A condition of the competition was that the international architects must have an Indian partner. We shortlisted 8 firms from the 104 including Rem Koolhaas (OMA Architects), Zaha Hadid Architects, I.M. Pei's Pei Cobb Freed & Part-

Another passionate belief is that the Museum must move out *into* the city. One of the most successful projects of the BDL Museum involved a collaboration with the Guggenheim Museum for the BMW Guggenheim Lab. It entailed creating a cornucopia of programming around the city for all age groups and interests, addressing how we could together imagine a better city. It brought large audiences into the Museum and produced many meaningful conversations that were documented. For a city like Mumbai that is beset with massive transportation problems and is famous for its civic apathy, these conversations helped to foster a sense of shared purpose and community. Perhaps we can have exhibitions on streets and on railway platforms and energise schools and universities with new displays. And if Augmented Reality becomes the norm a generation from now, perhaps we can zoom works from the Museum's collection into peoples' living and working spaces, so that they may enjoy them for a while as some of these objects were originally intended.

In my view ultimately this must be the goal of the Future Museum: to build a sense of empathy and community, a curiosity and respect for the other, to spark challenging conversations and a love of learning through art and culture. As technology separates us more and more and inserts us into silos, we must reach out beyond the walls of the museum to create memorable programmes and experiences for communities across age groups and interests to shape a happier and safer world.

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ners, Nieto Sobejano Arquitectos, wHY Architecture, Studio Mumbai Architecture and Amanda Levitt (A\_LA). The winning submission was presented by the American architectural firm Steven Holl Architects along with Opolis Architects. Steven Holl, a Pritzker prize winning architect, who has designed some of the world's most famous museums and institutions, presented a wonderful sculptural design that promised to have the impact of Bilbao on Mumbai. Unfortunately, the project became mired in a political controversy that has threatened to undo much of what we achieved. But we are not without hope that sometime in the future we may be able to renew the project.

*Johannes Beltz*

## Promote Cooperation!

Collecting, researching and collaborating in the  
postcolonial, digital age

Translated by Matthew Partridge

Over the past decade, discussions on the history of European museums have been dominated by issues related to their colonial past. Ethnological museums in particular have been subject to scrutiny and have faced increased pressure to openly address their past and, if necessary, to return objects from their collections to the countries of origin. But even large universal museums such as the British Museum or the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin) have come to the painful realisation that their view of themselves as humanist places of comprehensive collection and knowledge is increasingly being questioned. The establishment of Postcolonial Studies as a field of research has opened up new discursive spaces in the academic and media world, and the assumption that the museum equals enlightenment equals humanism equals science has been significantly challenged. In recent years, therefore, many European museums have made efforts to reinvent themselves. Programmatic names such as “world museum” or “museum of cultures” suggest dialogue and multivocality, and convey an intention to interact with the various “communities” involved (above all, the societies of origin) on an equal footing. These decolonising measures, however, have – often rightly – been dismissed as a purely cosmetic exercise or (empty) rhetoric.<sup>1</sup>

This essay presents a model for museum practice in Switzerland that has largely remained outside the current debate and the media spotlight because the institution has only indirect links to colonialism and is more firmly located within the context of art. For these very reasons,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf., among others, Kravagna, 2015.

it is interesting to take a look at this museum's initiatives and methods, as they offer important perspectives that could substantially expand the discussion in ethnological museums.<sup>2</sup> Swiss museums are not generally regarded as repositories of treasures from the colonial era. Switzerland did not have any colonies, nor did it seek to acquire such territories. One might think, therefore, that the subject of decolonisation has no relevance to the country,<sup>3</sup> but closer inspection soon reveals that colonialism is indeed an issue for Swiss museums. Because although Switzerland did not have any colonies of its own, it was involved in the trading of colonial commodities and maintained trade offices in many parts of the world. Switzerland even played a key role in areas such as the silk and cotton trades, and as a strategic partner, it supported the European colonial powers in their expansionist efforts. The slave trade also falls within the scope of this topic.<sup>4</sup>

The focus of the following analysis is on the Museum Rietberg, which as a museum of non-European art was not founded until 1952. At first glance, therefore, it does not appear to be burdened with the problematic past of colonialism. However, large parts of the museum's collections date from the colonial era or were acquired during that period, often using profits derived from overseas trade.

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<sup>2</sup> This article is also a review of and outlook for my years of work at the Museum Rietberg, where I am currently employed as Curator of South and South East Asian Art, but also chair the Curatorial Board, head the Department of Art Education, as well as serving as Deputy Director. My focus on South Asia and India stems from this professional specialisation. I would like to thank Annette Bhagwati, Peter Fux and Esther Tisa for the inspiring discussions on the subject of decolonisation that have informed this essay.

<sup>3</sup> As the European colonies of the 19th and 20th centuries were unprecedented in terms of their claim to power and international dominance (colonisation as a historic process of an economic, political-territorial, religious and social nature), the term "decolonisation" is above all defined as the liberation from colonial structures in the wake of European colonial rule in the period 1880–1960.

<sup>4</sup> For more on this topic, cf. Haller, 2016; Dejung, 2013; Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné, 2015.

## 1. THE MUSEUM RIETBERG: ORIGINS AND HISTORY

The Museum Rietberg has its origins in the collection of Eduard von der Heydt. During the 1920s and 1930s, von der Heydt bought numerous works of Asian, African, American and Oceanic art on the Western art market, with assets he had accumulated from various banking enterprises; he later donated his collection to the City of Zurich, which used it to found the Museum Rietberg in 1952.<sup>5</sup>

As far as South Asian art was concerned, von der Heydt above all purchased classic works of “religious” art such as Hindu bronzes and stone sculptures, as well as Buddhist and Jain sculptures.<sup>6</sup> It is important to mention here that despite his universalist approach, von der Heydt did not acquire a single object from India that would today be termed “tribal art”, in contrast to his collection of African masks or South Seas sculptures, which are today very valuable iconic works of “tribal art”. This had less to do with the collector’s personal taste than with a lack of interest in such objects – and hence their limited availability – among the leading art dealers of the time. The international art market had not yet discovered “tribal” India.<sup>7</sup>

The founding director of the Museum Rietberg was Johannes Itten, a co-founder of the Bauhaus who also became the director of the Kunstgewerbeschule Zurich (Arts and Crafts School and Museum) and the city’s Kunstgewerbemuseum (Arts and Crafts Museum). In 1956 Itten was succeeded as director of the Rietberg by Elsy Leuzinger, who institutionalised the teaching of non-European art at the University of Zurich as a lecturer from 1960 onwards, then as a titular professor from 1968. As an ethnologist with a special interest in Africa,

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<sup>5</sup> Illner, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Among other objects, he bought the bronze Dancing Shiva, which was later to become the showpiece of the museum collection; cf. Beltz, 2008 and 2011.

<sup>7</sup> The art historian Hermann Goetz, for example, mentions neither the tribal cultures of India nor the country’s contemporary art in his major survey of Indian art history, which was published in 1959; cf. Beltz, 2019, among others.

Leuzinger not only expanded the collection of West African art, but also and above all the collection of ancient American art. Alice Boner's collection of Indian sculptures also entered the museum under Leuzinger's tenure.<sup>8</sup> In 1972, Eberhard Fischer, an art ethnologist and expert on West Africa and India, was appointed director of the Museum Rietberg. His arrival marked the beginning of the era of Indian painting at the Rietberg, as Fischer did more than any other director to strengthen this section of the collection. With generous funding from sponsors and patrons, he assembled a collection of Pahari paintings that is now one of the most important of its kind in the world. Collaboration with leading art historians of the time resulted in numerous publications and exhibitions. The Museum Rietberg established itself as a key site of collection and research into courtly painting in India, but Eberhard Fischer also paid close attention to the country's wide array of artistic traditions: in 1972, soon after taking up his post as director, he curated an exhibition on art from northern India and emphasised the many different but interconnected cultural traditions that exist side by side on the subcontinent.<sup>9</sup> In a similar manner, Fischer mounted a groundbreaking exhibition in 1980 on the art and cultures of Odisha, in cooperation with colleagues from India.<sup>10</sup> The presentation for the first time documented all the key forms of art being produced in this Indian state, including architecture, sculpture, painting, woodcarving and textiles, and explored the connections and mutual influences between them.

Albert Lutz was the director of the Museum Rietberg from 1998 to 2019. During his tenure, the museum was refurbished and extended, and was subsequently reopened in 2007. The expansion of the buildings made it possible for the museum to mount larger shows and also to present a number of special exhibitions concurrently. This paved the

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<sup>8</sup> This donation is particularly noteworthy as it came to the Museum Rietberg with official permission from the Indian government, and after the country had tightened its law on the protection of cultural property. India agreed to the move on condition that the Alice Boner Collection would be put on permanent public display in a museum; cf. Lindt, 1982.

<sup>9</sup> Fischer, 1972.

<sup>10</sup> Fischer et al., 1980.

way for an increase in visitor numbers and a stronger public presence, as the museum became known to more than just a small circle of connoisseurs and specialists. As a result, a number of successful international exhibitions travelled to the Museum Rietberg.

The museum collection grew significantly with support from the Rietberg Circle and numerous patrons, by way of gifts and new acquisitions. In 2009 Eberhard Fischer donated the entire collection of textiles he had amassed during his time in Ahmedabad (1965–1966 and 1968–1971) to the Museum Rietberg.<sup>11</sup> Besides the fact that these modern textiles brought a new type of object into the collection, they were also craft items that would previously not have been considered “art”. Many of the producers of these objects belonged to marginalised sections of Indian society, the Dalit or “untouchable” castes. To include this social group in the realm of fine arts was an important new development.

During this period, the museum made significant acquisitions of Indian “folk and tribal art”.<sup>12</sup> These acquisitions fundamentally altered the profile of the collection of Indian art, which had previously focussed on sculptures and paintings, and this change was also reflected in the exhibition programme.<sup>13</sup> In late 2019 Annette Bhagwati was appointed the new director of the Museum Rietberg, and she will continue to consolidate the museum’s reputation as an international centre of expertise in the field of non-European art.

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<sup>11</sup> Fischer, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Between 2009 and 2019, more than 600 Indian ‘folk and tribal bronzes’ entered the museum collection; cf. Museum Rietberg Annual Report 2009, p. 67, and Annual Report 2011, pp. 52–55.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Beltz, 2009; Beltz and Mallebrein, 2012.



## 2. DECOLONISATION AND RESTITUTION

In recent years there have been increasing calls for collections from the colonial era to be immediately restituted to their countries of origin.<sup>14</sup> Although Switzerland is not considered a colonial power in the traditional sense, the country and its museums came under media scrutiny. In addition, the demand for restitution was not only directed at ethnological collections, but also at dedicated art museums such as the Museum Rietberg. Media enquiries often culminated in the question of when the “stolen” artworks in the Rietberg collections would finally be returned to the countries of origin.

The Museum Rietberg responded to these enquiries with careful circumspection, pointing out that the examination of the collection history, legality and acquisition context of its artworks has always been integral to its curatorial practice, even if such appraisals were not conducted under the heading of “provenance research”. In the context of an exhibition on the museum’s iconic masterpiece – the Dancing Shiva – for example, the acquisition and reception history of this key object was researched and documented for the first time.<sup>15</sup> And in an exhibition on precious ivory carvings that were produced in Sri Lanka for the Portuguese court during the Renaissance, the art historian Annemarie Jordan also investigated the acquisition history of these precious objects.<sup>16</sup>

In 2008 the Museum Rietberg created a provenance research position in order to address the museum’s own history – and above all the origins of the early holdings – in greater depth. The initial focus of this research was on Nazi-confiscated cultural property and the collection of Eduard von der Heydt.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Savoy, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Beltz, 2008 and 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Beltz and Jordan-Gschwend, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> On this topic, see the exhibition *From Buddha to Picasso. The Collector Eduard von der Heydt*; Illner, 2013; Tisa Francini, 2012 and 2013.

In recent years, the Museum Rietberg has made the move into the digital age by introducing a database and publishing its collection online. This is an ongoing process that is becoming increasingly important, as digitisation is one of the major issues facing museums in the future. Transnational research is a pivotal aspect in this development. Established provenances are incorporated into the database and this is made available online. Digitisation will make it possible for the universal cultural legacy with its diverse, exciting and contradictory histories to be shared with a global audience. Scholarly exchange and research efforts will be networked and new virtual collections and exhibitions of artworks will be created. As a result, the question of where the original items are physically located may become less important in future.

The Museum Rietberg will continue to document and expand its collection in this sense. The current debates have naturally influenced the museum's acquisition policy; besides the changing market, above all the introduction of the Swiss Federal Act on the International Transfer of Cultural Property (CPTA) has contributed to this change.<sup>18</sup> But already under our former director, Eberhard Fischer, the museum did not acquire any archaeological finds, sculptures, bronzes or terracotta works from presumably illicit excavations, or any other objects of questionable provenance, for the South Asian collection.<sup>19</sup>

The museum will also continue to examine and address the history of its collections, and will present these complex histories in exhibitions and on digital platforms. If justified demands for restitution were to be made, the museum would of course return the works concerned.

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<sup>18</sup> The Federal Act on the International Transfer of Cultural Property (CPTA) regulates the import and export of cultural property to and from Switzerland with regard to protecting and preserving cultural heritage and preventing the illicit import and export of cultural property; <https://www.bak.admin.ch/bak/en/home/cultural-heritage/transfer-of-cultural-property.html> (accessed 7 May 2020).

<sup>19</sup> In 2003 the museum returned a group of Gandhara sculptures to an art dealer when he refused to disclose the actual provenance of the objects; cf. Museum Rietberg Annual Report 2003, p. 36.

Of greater importance, however, is a sustained, long-term approach to these issues, which are also and increasingly being raised by the countries of origin. Not restitution, but rather *collaboration* with the countries of origin is the key strategic objective. These collaborative efforts on the part of the Museum Rietberg are not about making amends for alleged wrongdoing. On the contrary: the transparency in the museum's approach to its own collection, the transnational research it conducts and the exhibitions that come about as a result are a reflection of the Rietberg's conception of itself. International collaboration is, therefore, not a gesture of apology or a form of moral justification; rather, it is intrinsically linked to the museum's core tasks, which involve conducting research into objects, their origin and production; carrying out fieldwork in situ; undertaking archival work; preserving, conserving, communicating and exhibiting the objects in the collection. In the digital age, transnational cooperation via online platforms and databases will thereby become increasingly important.

### 3. INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION: THE CORE OF THE MUSEUM'S PRACTICE

As the only museum in Switzerland dedicated to non-European art, the Museum Rietberg has been collaborating with scholars and specialists from the countries of origin in the areas of research, exhibition-making, excavation and conservation for several decades.

In all of his major exhibition projects on Indian art, our former director Eberhard Fischer worked closely with Indian experts such as B. N. Goswamy, Dinanath Pathy and Sitakant Mahapatra.<sup>20</sup> Fischer was convinced that field research, excavations and building the museum collection could only be done in collaboration with partners in the countries of origin. The best example of this kind of partnership is the 2011 exhibition *The Way of the Master. The Great Artists of India, 1100–1900*, a highly regarded display that was subsequently shown at

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<sup>20</sup> Fischer et al., 1980.

the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.<sup>21</sup> The Museum Rietberg presented the crème de la crème of Indian painting and brought artworks from leading international museums to Zurich: the most magnificent works from the legendary album kept in the Golestan Palace in Tehran, paintings from the Royal Collection in Great Britain, and treasures from the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts in St Petersburg – to name just three of the 42 lenders involved. This project was only possible through collaboration between the leading art historians B. N. Goswamy, Milo Beach and Eberhard Fischer.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.1 Cooperation in the area of special exhibitions

Large-scale special exhibitions such as the “Indian Masters” invariably rely on collaboration to secure international loans. In recent years, however, the Museum Rietberg has expanded this common museum practice. An important change in the museum’s curatorial strategy was – where possible – to organise special exhibitions on themes of Indian art with partners in India and then also to show these exhibitions in India, or to bring exhibitions from India to the Museum Rietberg. One such project was *Indian Colours: Materials and Techniques of Pigment Painting in Rajasthan*, which was organised in 2004 in collaboration with the Indian artists Desmond Lazaro and Shammi Sharma.<sup>23</sup>

One truly pioneering project was a travelling exhibition on the Swiss artist Alice Boner (1889–1981), which was shown in three venues in India before it came to the Museum Rietberg.<sup>24</sup> The exhibition opened in Mumbai in 2014, travelled to the National Museum in New Delhi in 2016, to Bharat Kala Bhavan in Varanasi in 2017, and was finally presented in Zurich in 2018.<sup>25</sup> Alice Boner not only gifted her collection of Indian art to the Museum Rietberg; following her death, the

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<sup>21</sup> The exhibition in New York was titled *Wonder of the Age: Master Painters of India, 1100–1900*.

<sup>22</sup> Beach et al., 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Beltz et al., 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Beltz and Kuratli, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. <https://www.dfae.admin.ch/countries/india/en/home/news/agenda.html/>

museum also received her artistic estate, writings, library and photographic archive. The Rietberg thus holds virtually the entire estate of this extraordinary woman, who spent almost 40 years of her life in Varanasi. Boner was a particularly interesting subject for an Indo-Swiss exhibition project due to the fact that she was a mediator between India and the West at a time when India was reinventing itself. As an artist, collector, patron and scholar, she made a major contribution to a new understanding of Indian art in the first half of the 20th century. Among her many achievements, she founded the Alice Boner Institute in Varanasi, which remains a place of intercultural exchange and dialogue to this day.<sup>26</sup>

The Museum Rietberg took a similar approach in 2013 when it was gifted a large collection of Indian musical instruments. The exhibition *Sculpted Sounds* in 2014 marked the beginning of several years of collaboration with a number of Indian museums and partners.<sup>27</sup> Marie Eve Celio-Scheurer, who at that time was an assistant curator at the Museum Rietberg, initiated a cooperative project with the Crafts Museum in New Delhi. New emphasis was placed on conducting systematic ethnological fieldwork in India and viewing historical archival materials, as very little information was available on the significance, use and production of sculptural banams (stringed instruments played by the Santal people). This collaboration led to a further exhibition project: in 2015 the exhibition *Cadence and Counterpoint: Documenting Santal Musical Traditions* was presented at the National Museum in New Delhi.<sup>28</sup> What made this exhibition particularly noteworthy was

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*countries/india/en/meta/agenda-swiss-indien-friendship/2017/september/exhibition--alice-boner-in-india--a-life-for-art* (accessed 7 May 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. [https://rietberg.ch/en/linked/aliceboner\\_en](https://rietberg.ch/en/linked/aliceboner_en) (accessed 7 May 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Beltz and Celio-Scheurer, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> The project was generously supported by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture (BAK), the Embassy of Switzerland in India, UNESCO, the Accentus Foundation (Elena Probst Fonds) and the Ecole Cantonale d'Art de Lausanne. I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to all the sponsors and donors for their support; cf. Beltz et al., 2015; Beltz and Celio-Scheurer, 2019.

the fact that it was shown in India's most important museum, which had not previously paid much attention to this "marginal" theme – the cultural traditions of India's indigenous peoples.<sup>29</sup> The exhibition was all the more significant because around the same time, New Delhi's Crafts Museum was closed down as a permanent and prominent exhibition space devoted to this type of art.<sup>30</sup>

Two other important cooperative projects should also be mentioned here. In 2018 the Museum Rietberg was the first museum in the world to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Archaeology and Museums in Pakistan. As a first gesture of friendship, the Peshawar Museum sent a monumental Buddha on loan to Zurich. Before this, the sculpture had never been allowed to leave the museum in Peshawar, let alone the country.<sup>31</sup> This new partnership led the Museum Rietberg to turn its attention to a previously neglected art region, and the first successful initiative was soon followed by another project: in winter 2019, the Rietberg opened an exhibition with young Pakistani artists, who were invited to focus on and respond to works from the Swiss museum's collections. The exhibition was originally meant to be shown in Karachi too, but this proved impossible due to a delay in reimporting the works to Pakistan.<sup>32</sup>

This list of initiatives concludes with a project that has not yet been implemented. In an exhibition scheduled to open in autumn 2020, the Museum Rietberg will present Japanese woodblock prints from its collection at the Government Museum and Art Gallery in Chandigarh. This is the first time the Rietberg is lending precious original artworks

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Khurana Suanshu, "Sacred Record. A collaborative project between Zurich's Museum Rietberg and Delhi's Crafts Museum documents the rare and distinctive musical traditions of the Santals", *The Indian Express*, 26 April 2015. <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/sacred-record/>.

<sup>30</sup> The exhibition was published online by the Google Cultural Institute as part of Google Arts & Culture, and is now accessible to all; see [www.google.com/culturalinstitute](http://www.google.com/culturalinstitute) (accessed 7 May 2020).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. <https://www.eda.admin.ch/deza/en/home/news/news.html/content/deza/en/meta/news-deza/2018/12/buddha-ausstellung> (accessed 7 May 2020).

<sup>32</sup> Beltz et al., 2019.

to a museum in India. It is also the very first exhibition of Japanese Surimono art in India, and for this reason the show is attracting a lot of attention and media coverage in the country. This project represents a new step and it sends out a message that resonates far beyond the restitution debate, because it is about sharing and communicating our cultural heritage globally.<sup>33</sup>

### 3.2 Cooperation in the area of professional training

The surimono exhibition will also be a pioneering project in terms of a new form of cooperation. As part of the project in Chandigarh, Martin Sollberger, the exhibition designer at the Museum Rietberg, will give an introductory course on exhibition design for a group of around 25 participants. The two museums are therefore taking this exhibition as an opportunity to launch a long-term training programme.

An exchange programme for assistant curators and interns is also among our objectives for the coming years. The Museum Rietberg gained first experience of this with the internship of Amrita Lahiri, who worked on the exhibition *Shiva Nataraja: The Cosmic Dancer* in 2008. Lahiri not only made her own artistic contribution to the exhibition; she also organised and looked after works presented by other participants. A large network has now been established in this area, and our aim is to extend this further. For several years, the Museum Rietberg has been working with the Alice Boner Institute in Varanasi, a place where scholars and artists from all over the world come together to work and enter into dialogue with local partners. I would also like to mention our collaboration with the company Green Barbet, whose director, Harsha Vinay, not only wrote an essay for the catalogue of the 2019 exhibition *Mirrors: The Reflected Self* at the Museum Rietberg, but also produced three documentary films that have gone on

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<sup>33</sup> The announcement of the upcoming exhibition has drawn considerable media attention; cf. 'Exhibition featuring Japanese woodblock prints in the works', *Hindustan Times*, 30 October 2019; Gurnaaz Kaur, 'Tale of two museums and few Japanese prints', *Tribune*, 5 November 2019.

to achieve international success. These have been screened in Zurich, Mumbai, New Delhi and Heidelberg.

Desirable future developments include the regular and systematic exchange of specialists, as well as the provision of further education and training for experts. And, as outlined above, this should definitely to be understood as a two-way process. The massive reduction in professorships in Indology (in connection with chairs in Indian art history) that has taken place in Europe has led to a deplorable shortage of professionals in these fields. For this reason alone, future research must be transnational. Long-term exchange programmes for curators, scholars, art educators and art restorer-conservators have a lasting effect in both directions and will therefore play an important role for both sides.

### *3.3 Cooperation in the area of conservation*

Collaboration also takes place in the context of measures to preserve cultural property. In connection with the spectacular loan of the Buddha sculpture from Peshawar, a workshop on stone conservation was organised in Islamabad, with valuable support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC); the workshop was led by the Swiss stone conservator Tobias Hotz, and representatives from museums all over Pakistan were invited to take part.<sup>34</sup> Although we at the Museum Rietberg have up to now mainly focussed on South Asia and India, our aim is to broaden our horizons. Since 2010, for example, we have maintained a cooperative relationship with the Palace Museum in Fumban, Cameroon, which is also concerned with the restoration and preservation of the royal collection.<sup>35</sup>

I would, however, like to highlight the exemplary, long-standing cooperation that exists between the Museum Rietberg and Peru. Because it

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<sup>34</sup> The SDC is Switzerland's international cooperation agency within the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA); cf. <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/dfaf/dfaf/organisation-fdfa/directorates-divisions/sdc.html> (accessed 7 May 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Oberhofer, 2018 and [https://rietberg.ch/en/linked/fumban\\_en](https://rietberg.ch/en/linked/fumban_en) (accessed 7 May 2020).



was in Peru that a collaborative project was set up to conserve the temple sculptures at Chavín de Huántar (a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1985), in connection with the special exhibition *Chavín. Peru's Mysterious Temple in the Andes* at the Museum Rietberg. This was the world's first museum exhibition devoted to the "mother culture" of the Central Andes, and it was also shown at the Museo de Arte de Lima (MALI) in 2015, where it became a popular success. Rather than paying a lending fee to the Ministry of Culture of Peru, an agreement was reached whereby a conservation project in Peru would be implemented and funded for several years. This endeavour was funded in equal parts by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture (BAK) and the Museum Rietberg. Between 2011 and 2015, this resulted not only in the full installation of a conservation and restoration workshop at the Museo Nacional de Chavín, but also in the expert conservation of numerous sculptures. As a fitting finale, the Tello Obelisk – an approximately two-metre-high sculpture of great national and international importance – was conserved in collaboration with Peruvian specialists and mounted on a new base. The Tello Obelisk is now the centrepiece of the permanent exhibition at the Museo Nacional de Chavín.<sup>36</sup>

In 2017 a follow-up exhibition entitled *NASCA. PERU – Searching for Traces in the Desert* was shown in Zurich. This exhibition was part of a large-scale archaeological project in the desert plains between Nazca and Palpa on the south coast of Peru, in the context of which extensive restoration and conservation work was again carried out: from 1997 to 2006, the Swiss-Liechtenstein Foundation for Archaeological Research Abroad (SLSA) funded a major archaeological research project on the Nazca Lines – a world-famous series of geoglyphs (ground drawings) – and their cultural significance.<sup>37</sup> This commitment led not only to the establishment of a first-rate local history museum in the small town of Palpa in 2004, with funding from Switzerland, but also to the most comprehensive international museum exhibition on Nasca to date: *NASCA. PERU – Searching for Traces in the Desert* was first shown

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<sup>36</sup> Fux, 2012 and 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. <http://www.slsa.ch/abgeschlossene-projekte/nasca-palpa/>

in 2017 at the Museo de Arte de Lima, and was attended by just under 90,000 visitors, setting a new record for the museum.<sup>38</sup>

This list would not be complete, however, without two very different examples of projects where the Museum Rietberg was itself the recipient of conservation services. In the first case, an early Buddhist silk painting in the collection of the Museum Rietberg was restored with funding from the Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, which is supported by the Japanese government.<sup>39</sup> The painting was taken to a Japanese workshop certified for the restoration of cultural treasures, where it was conserved and remounted over a period of two years (2006–2008). The cost of transporting the work to and from Japan was borne by the Museum Rietberg as the cooperation partner. Japan sees its role as protecting national cultural properties, irrespective of their location and current owner. The second example of an admirable cultural policy was the restoration of a painting: from 2017 to 2019, a 19th-century Korean Buddhist portrait of a priest was inspected and restored by experts in the workshop of the National Museum of Korea in Seoul.<sup>40</sup>

### *3.4 Cooperation with diaspora communities*

The role played by diaspora communities is frequently alluded to in the current debates on decolonisation and restitution. The argument is put forward that immigrants from the countries in which the collection holdings originated should be more directly addressed and invited to become partners in joint projects. This, too, is not exactly a new idea. Back in 2003, the Museum Rietberg was already collaborating with members of the Indian diaspora in Switzerland. As part of the exhibi-

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<sup>38</sup> See Fux, 2011 and 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Amida Buddha with the bodhisattvas Seishi and Kannon, unknown artist, Japan, Muromachi period, mid 14th century, hanging scroll; ink, colour and gold on silk, Inv.-Nr. RJP 401.

<sup>40</sup> Portrait of the Zen Master Chupadang, unknown artist, Korea, Joseon dynasty, 19th century, Inv.-Nr. RKO 1; cf. Museum Rietberg Annual Report 2019.

tion *Ganesha: The god with an elephant's head*, the museum invited Hindus from all over Switzerland to celebrate the Ganesh Chaturthi festival on the museum grounds. A spectacular highlight of this event was the immersion of a Ganesha idol in Lake Zurich during the Long Night of the Zurich Museums. This first systematic contact was built upon in the large-scale exhibition *Hindu Zurich*, which was shown at the city's town hall. The involvement of Hindus living in Zurich was the guiding principle of this exhibition, and they contributed to a presentation of their religious community that included interviews, films, photographs and a selection of objects. An exhibition “about” Hindus in Zurich thus became an exhibition developed “with” representatives of the Zurich diaspora. The culmination of this project was undoubtedly the celebration of Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, which was attended by hundreds of Hindus from all over Switzerland.<sup>41</sup>

This was not the only instance of this type of cooperation. In 2018, Swiss Buddhists were invited to collaborate with the Museum Rietberg on the exhibition *Next Stop Nirvana: Approaches to Buddhism*, and the 2019 exhibition *Congo as Fiction* was also a cooperative project involving young artists from Congo.<sup>42</sup> The list could be continued with further opportunities for partnerships, for example with universities, but the intention here is not to simply outline or praise the Museum Rietberg's policy of cooperation. These specific examples have been provided in order to add a new aspect to the debate on decolonisation.

### 3.5 Cooperation means taking and maintaining a firm stance

The core message of this article is an appeal to museum directors, curators, art educators and restorer-conservators all over the world to initiate more projects with partner museums. Beyond the great debates and political negotiations on reparation, museums can communicate with one another in a relatively uncomplicated manner. They can face up to their past and try to shape a new, different future with new international partners. This does not even require bilateral agreements; above

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<sup>41</sup> Beltz, 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Oberhofer and Guyer, 2019.

all, it requires highly motivated museum professionals on both sides. The question of who owns artworks is thereby less important than the questions of how we can better document all of our artworks and how we can share our knowledge – irrespective of geographical, cultural and linguistic borders.

#### 4. LOOKING AHEAD

The arguments presented in this article can be summarised as follows:

1. While Swiss museums do not have their own colonial history, they nevertheless have close ties to the colonial era. Demands for decolonisation relate not only to ethnological museums, but also to museums of art and natural history. For the Museum Rietberg, decolonisation involves examining the history of its own collections, making this history transparent and highlighting possible links to colonialism.

2. In the same way that colonisation was a lengthy and far-reaching process, decolonisation did not end with liberation from foreign rule and the creation of nation states in the 20th century. This raises the question of whether – and to what extent – “colonial” categories, epistemologies and power imbalances can be overcome within the scope of museum practice. For one thing, museums are the result of the history of science and scholarship in the West; their categories and ordering principles are therefore inseparably linked to Western epistemology. For another, access to collections, research, publications, prestigious jobs and financial resources is still firmly in the hands of Western educational establishments. Although all of the major European and North American museums today consider themselves to be universal museums and global agents, the question remains as to whether the exhibitions they produce – in other words, the value created and the knowledge generated – are actually “postcolonial”. Decolonisation above all relates to political processes and the redistribution of resources and profits. How can we prevent “cooperation” and “decolonisation” from becoming nothing but empty phrases? The current debate on the colonial context of collections and provenance research in European

museums seems to be largely self-referential and tends to avoid radical criticism of current asymmetries of power.<sup>43</sup>

3. Above all, therefore, decolonisation in museums means implementing sustained international cooperative programmes and initiatives between European museums and the countries of origin. This still seems to be the area with the greatest need for improvement and action. Long-term funding and resources must be generated with the aid of foundations and sponsors in order to initiate cooperative projects, but also to maintain them. Low-threshold access to these funds is required, as cooperative projects in smaller museums can fail due to a lack of resources and the associated administrative requirements.

4. A rethink is urgently required on the part of museum directors, who must orient their institutions towards the urgent need for cooperation. The occupational profile of curators and art educators must also be adapted accordingly. Finally, the (unfortunately often weak) national museum associations, and first and foremost ICOM, must commit to this objective. Otherwise there is a risk that the concept of cooperation is limited to a purely academic debate on the postcolonial museum, restitution and communities, and ends up being a neocolonial metaphor.

To reiterate: the Museum Rietberg is committed to cooperating with the countries of origin (but also with other interest groups) because it sees itself as a museum of non-European art. Cooperation is thus firmly anchored in the museum's programmatic strategy, and is not an attempt to make reparation to third parties or agents. Even if the idea of a universal cultural heritage remains utopian, we feel a responsibility to uphold and promote this stance.

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<sup>43</sup> Weber-Sinn and Ivanov, 2020, pp. 73–76.

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## The Linden-Museum of the Future

Translated by Matthew Partridge

Ethnographic museums in Germany currently find themselves at the centre of a controversial public and media debate that was sparked, above all, by the conception of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. The accusation being levelled against the museums is that many objects in their collections were appropriated during the colonial era and entered their institutions in unethical circumstances. It is also alleged that through their “non-European collections”, ethnographic museums continue to reproduce and legitimise colonial thinking, above all by emphasising cultural differences between Europe and the rest of the world. Associated with these accusations in the current debate are ethical issues related to the ownership of objects and the topic of restitution. The treatment of colonial-era collections is criticised, and the question is raised of how – and above all by whom – “cultural otherness” is presented in ethnographic museums.

Many of these concerns are not new. The representation of cultural otherness was a subject of critical debate among ethnologists in the 1980s, and the extent to which colonial, European structures of representation continued to exist in the present day was already being investigated.<sup>2</sup> The “global turn” from the 1990s onwards also had an impact on ethnographic museums, bringing with it a demand for the reorientation of cultural and historical institutions. And over the past 10 years, a new generation of ethnographic museum directors has stepped forward to take up this challenge.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Henrike Hoffmann and Adelheid Lehmann for their support in editing this article.

<sup>2</sup> James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.



Figure 1: Exterior view.

Copyright Linden-Museum Stuttgart. Photograph by: Dominik Drasow

In 2018, the controversial issue of colonial legacy gained increased media and political attention following the publication of a report by Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr on “The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage”,<sup>3</sup> which had been commissioned by the French president, Emmanuel Macron.

Like many other ethnographic museums, the Linden-Museum Stuttgart – with its collection of around 160,000 works of art and everyday items from Asia, America, Africa and Oceania – has been addressing these issues openly and self-critically for a number of years, and is currently undergoing a comprehensive process of reflection and reorientation.

It is difficult for any institution with a lengthy historical evolution to disentangle itself from its colonial ties. The Linden-Museum Stuttgart is therefore actively seeking a new and responsible approach to its collections and their history; new forms of display and collection practice

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<sup>3</sup> Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics* (2018). Available online at: <http://restitutionreport2018.com/> (last accessed 28 May 2020).

in the context of the postcolonial debate; and dialogic and multi-perspective formats to be employed in the areas of scholarship and exhibition-making.

A modern and ethically respectful form of museum practice – one that allows renegotiation of the prerogative of interpretation and supports the existence of multiple narratives – can only be achieved with the aid of participatory formats, and requires cooperation or partnership with representatives of the societies of origin and of our own diverse urban communities. In an effort to create the “decolonised” ethnographic museum of the future, we are therefore testing out different forms of exhibition and participation in an ongoing series of projects. Our critical reflection focuses on the following questions:

- How do we deal with collections that were acquired in unethical circumstances?
- How can cultural diversity and our increasingly diverse and globalised society be presented in a respectful and appropriate manner?
- How can stereotypes and fixed attributions be replaced by new perspectives and networks?
- How can our predominantly historical collection be linked to current social issues, and in this way contribute towards social cohesion?

These considerations will form the basis of our new concept for the Linden-Museum, which is to be implemented in approximately ten years’ time in a new building planned by the State of Baden-Württemberg and the City of Stuttgart.

#### DEALING WITH THE “DIFFICULT HERITAGE”

Ethnographic museums and ethnology as an academic discipline are closely linked to the colonial era. Most ethnographic museums were founded in the mid-19th or early 20th century. The collections of the Linden-Museum Stuttgart are rooted in the activities of the “Württembergischer Verein für Handelsgeographie und Förderung deutscher Interessen im Ausland” (Württemberg association for commercial

geography and the promotion of German interests abroad), which was founded in February 1882. Commercial geographic associations were established in other cities besides Stuttgart and saw themselves as information platforms for people who wanted to emigrate to the newly acquired colonies.

In 1884 the Württemberg association began to assemble a museum collection. Karl Graf von Linden, a lawyer and later Lord Chamberlain at the royal court of Württemberg, was appointed chairman of the association, and the collection grew rapidly thanks to his extensive network of contacts. In 1886, 300 objects were listed in the inventory; in 1899 more than 9,000 were recorded; and by 1910 von Linden had collected and documented over 60,000 objects. His appeals to potential donors motivated them to send objects to Stuttgart from all over the world; in exchange, he not only offered financial rewards, but also medals awarded by the King of Württemberg. Von Linden's aim was to preserve records of endangered indigenous cultures and to document their lifestyles. The collected objects were first exhibited in Stuttgart's Haus der Wirtschaft (House of Commerce). However, the rapid growth of the collection meant that a new museum building was soon required. On 28 May 1911, not long after von Linden's death, the museum named after him was inaugurated by King Wilhelm II at its current location on Stuttgart's Hegelplatz.

During the Second World War, the majority of the museum collection was evacuated for safekeeping, but the building sustained severe damage in air raids in 1944. The Linden-Museum was one of the first buildings in Stuttgart to be restored after the war, and by 1952 the collections had returned. The reconstruction of the museum had, however, exhausted the association's financial resources. In 1973 the trusteeship of the museum was transferred to the State of Baden-Württemberg; since then, the City of Stuttgart has borne half of the Linden-Museum's running costs.

This brief historical overview shows that the Linden-Museum has close ties to colonialism and its power structures, above all with regard to the acquisition of objects from the former German colonies. Colonial-era

provenance research therefore plays a key role in the museum's efforts to address its own history.

The acquisition contexts of the collected objects vary considerably depending on the countries and regions of origin, and are the result of complex processes of encounter. Objects may have entered the museum collection by way of purchase, donation or exchange, in the context of missionary work, or through acts of violence such as theft or looting. Any attempt to gain clarity on these matters is made more difficult by the fact that the inventories often contain only the names of the donors, with no indication of the contexts of the objects' appropriation.

The Linden-Museum Stuttgart was one of the first museums in Germany to establish a position for colonial-era provenance research; this took place in 2016 as part of the project "Schwieriges Erbe: Zum Umgang mit kolonialzeitlichen Objekten in ethnologischen Museen" (Difficult Heritage: Dealing with Colonial-Era Objects in Ethnographic Museums), implemented in cooperation with the University of Tübingen's Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies and Ludwig Uhland Institute. Gesa Grimme took up this position and was tasked with carrying out the first systematic analysis of the museum's collections from Namibia, Cameroon and the Bismarck Archipelago. This involved examining the circumstances surrounding the acquisition of the objects and the biographies of the donors, and categorising these according to professional or personal contexts. Grimme's study, which encompassed around 25,400 objects donated by 315 individuals, reveals the direct links between the German colonial territories and the museum collections: 91% of the objects from these three regions entered the collections before 1920 as donations from colonial officials, people employed in the colonial economy, or military personnel. Of the items from Namibia, Cameroon or the Bismarck Archipelago that entered the collections between 1900 and 1920, 34% came to Stuttgart via the military, 18% via the colonial economy, 17% via the colonial administration, and 9% via research expeditions. A difference can be seen between the collections from Africa and those from the South Seas: in territories where colonial army forces were deployed during this

period, over 40% of the objects entered the museum from military contexts, whereas the collections of objects from Oceania reveal that 30% of these came from research expeditions.<sup>4</sup>

At the Linden-Museum Stuttgart, two members of staff are continuing to conduct colonial-era provenance research on other areas of the collection. It is clear, however, that we are only at the beginning of this process, as the “problematic” and unethical acquisition contexts we aim to address are not confined to the period of formal German colonial rule, but include power imbalances dating from the 15th century to the present day. Our approach to this issue is in accordance with the guidelines published by the German Museums Association.<sup>5</sup> Focussing only on the African continent – as the media and political debate does – would not enable us to achieve our specific objective.

The results of our provenance research and the insights we have gained into the museum’s historical role must now be published and communicated to our visitors. This information is presented both on the Linden-Museum’s website and in our planned “Sammlung digital” (digital collection), and is also displayed on a screen in the exhibition “Where is Africa?”. In addition, we are currently preparing a special exhibition entitled “Schwieriges Erbe. Linden-Museum, Württemberg und Kolonialismus” (Difficult Heritage: The Linden-Museum, Württemberg and Colonialism), to be shown in Winter 2020. The results of a historical study of Württemberg, initiated by the Linden-Museum, will be presented here in a workshop display.

One of the key issues in the public debate surrounding colonial-era cultural property is the demand for restitution. When a Bible and whip that belonged to the well-known Nama chief Hendrik Witbooi was returned by the State of Baden-Württemberg and the City of Stuttgart to the Republic of Namibia in 2019, this was one of the first restitu-

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<sup>4</sup> The final report (in German) is available online at: [https://www.lindenmuseum.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/SchwierigesErbe\\_Provenienzforschung\\_Abschlussbericht.pdf](https://www.lindenmuseum.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/SchwierigesErbe_Provenienzforschung_Abschlussbericht.pdf) (last accessed 28 May 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <https://www.museumbund.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/dmb-guidelines-colonial-context.pdf> (last accessed 28 May 2020).



*Figure 2: Return of Witbooi objects by Science Minister Theresia Bauer to President Hage Geingob, February 2019. Copyright Shawn van Eeden*

tions in Germany of cultural property from a colonial context. The two objects were seized on 12 April 1893 by the German colonial army in Hornkranz, where Captain Witbooi had established his headquarters, and entered the Linden-Museum collection in 1902. In a ceremony held in Gibeon on 28 February 2019, they were formally handed over to Hage Geingob, the President of the Republic of Namibia, by Theresia Bauer, Minister of Science, Research and Arts in the state government of Baden-Württemberg. (Figure 2)

Prior to the return of these objects, the Linden-Museum Stuttgart had been motivated by its provenance research findings to promote sustained dialogue with Namibia; to this end, we submitted a proposal for the project “With Namibia: Engaging the Past, Sharing the Future” to the Ministry of Science, Research and Arts of the State of Baden-Württemberg. This project, which was conceived by Dr Sandra Ferracuti in close collaboration with partners in Namibia, is now an integral part of Baden-Württemberg’s “Namibia Initiative”; it aims to gather knowledge, perspectives and experience with regard to the collections from

Namibia, to share these with the Namibian project partners and to build a platform for lasting dialogue between all of those involved. The project also intends to inform wider audiences in Baden-Württemberg and Namibia about the shared history between Germany and Namibia, and to encourage an exchange of views on the interpretation and significance of the museum collections.

Our key partners in the development and implementation of the project are the Owela National Museum of Namibia in Windhoek (NMN), the University of Namibia (UNAM), the University of Tübingen, the Museum Association of Namibia (MAN), and the NGOs Heritage Watch, the Maharero Royal Traditional Authority and the Ovaherero Genocide Foundation.

During the first phase of the project, the Linden-Museum Stuttgart had the opportunity to work with four representatives of Nama and Herero organisations who completed residencies here; their joint aim was to make the museum's holdings from Namibia more accessible to the communities in that country. The second part of the project is taking place in cooperation with the Institute of Didactics of History and Public History at the University of Tübingen; it consists of a summer school programme for ten students from Tübingen and a further ten from the University of Namibia (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences), who will work on the collections in Stuttgart and in Windhoek. The third part of the project will be coordinated by the partner institutions in Namibia, and aims to engage a wider Namibian audience in the dialogue surrounding these collections. Finally, the findings and experiences gained from this project will be documented in a joint publication.<sup>6</sup>

Baden-Württemberg's "Namibia Initiative" is particularly innovative in terms of its broad scope: it looks beyond the issue of museum collections and considers the task of dealing with the legacy of the colonial era as a challenge for society as a whole. This is especially important

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<sup>6</sup> Unpublished report by Dr Sandra Ferracuti and Christoph Rippe (20 April 2020).



because the colonial past plays only a subordinate role in Germany's "memory culture". Along with the Linden-Museum, the Landesarchiv (State Archive of Baden-Württemberg), the Universities of Tübingen and Freiburg, the University of Education in Freiburg, the German Literature Archive in Marbach and the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart are currently planning dialogue-based projects with Namibia. These are generating joint research initiatives and teaching materials, as well as encouraging productive exchange in the fields of contemporary art and archival research.<sup>7</sup>

Viewing this topic as a matter for society as a whole is also required because the current media debate often gives the impression that ethnographic museums are solely responsible for the processes of historical reappraisal, reconciliation and healing colonial wounds. These are tasks that cannot be accomplished by museums alone, even with the aid of restitution.

Restitution is an important means of facing up to historical responsibility. It can offer museums a great opportunity to move forward, as long as it is not reduced to a way of unburdening oneself of a "difficult heritage", but is instead regarded as the beginning and basis of a new, transcultural form of museum practice.

However, over and above the question of how collections that entered museums in controversial or unethical circumstances should be dealt with, there is another important issue related to this "difficult heritage". If museums are regarded not only as repositories of knowledge, but also as institutions of identity formation, then ethnographic museums in particular are burdened by their "non-European collections" and by the historical perspective of the "them"/"us" dichotomy. Throughout their history, ethnographic museums have contributed to the formation of European identity in opposition to non-European cultures, and have helped to legitimise Eurocentric cultural hierarchisation.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. <https://muk.baden-wuerttemberg.de/de/service/presse/pressemitteilung/pid/namibia-initiative-des-landes-1/> (last accessed 28 May 2020).

In Germany today, it would be out of the question to establish a museum of “non-European art and everyday culture”; this kind of institution no longer corresponds to our society, which has been transformed by immigration and is now characterised by religious and ethnic diversity.

But how should an ethnographic museum deal with the burden of a “difficult heritage”? How can the museum replace attributions and stereotypes of “otherness” with new perceptions and networks, and help to change how the Global South is viewed by society as a whole? Museum collections represent relationships between different societies; the meanings and interpretations of these collections vary depending on one’s perspective and on when the objects are being viewed.

The historical distinction between “us” or “ours” within Europe and “them” or “theirs” outside Europe cannot be overcome, nor the representation of transcultural connections be improved, unless ethnographic objects from within Europe are also incorporated into museum collections. In future, therefore, the Linden-Museum intends to integrate loaned items of everyday culture from the Württemberg State Museum, in order to compensate for the lack of objects from European contexts. Exhibitions on regional European themes could also be a positive addition to the museum’s future activities.

Furthermore, the ethnographic museum of the future can only define itself in association with representatives of the societies of origin and of the diverse urban society within which it is situated. In order to overcome colonial thinking, the inclusion of multiple social groups must be considered integral to all museum practice; this will enable multi-perspective approaches to scholarship, presentation and communication, and strengthen the voices of marginalised or hitherto “silent” groups. In this way, the ethnographic museum can become a place where the interpretations and interests of different groups are taken into account and discussed.

The Linden-Museum’s current working practices provide some useful insights into how such approaches could be implemented in future.

## EXAMPLES OF DIALOGIC AND MULTI-PERSPECTIVE MUSEUM PRACTICE

Over the past few years, the Linden-Museum Stuttgart has been testing different models of participatory museum practice, which involve cooperation at various levels with representatives of the societies of origin and of our diverse urban communities. These models include co-curated exhibitions; forms of co-collecting; joint workshops; interventions by artists; residency programmes, joint research activities and social engagement. Two projects will be outlined here as examples of our numerous activities: the project “LindenLAB” and the permanent exhibition “Where is Africa?”. Both projects constitute experimental, process-based approaches and provide an empirical basis on which to develop a new concept for the ethnographic museum of the future.

1. The project “LindenLAB Participation, Provenance, Presentation” is being funded from 2019 to 2021 by the German Federal Cultural Foundation, as part of its Initiative for Ethnological Collections, and is coordinated by Henrike Hoffmann. This project consists of eight workshops and presentations in which we are experimenting with new forms of participation. Each workshop involves guests from the societies of origin and representatives of our diverse urban communities, as well as university colleagues, curators from the Linden-Museum, the heads of our press and education departments and our provenance researchers.

The LAB was installed in one room of the museum and serves not only as an exhibition space, but also as a place of encounter; it is a welcoming location for workshops and educational activities in which visitors are invited to take part. A raised platform was added for use during these events, and this is also where the project library is located. In response to questions we have raised, visitors can note down their ideas and wishes for the museum’s reorientation and post these on one wall of the LAB. The ongoing processes at the LAB are documented in a project blog, where guest contributions are welcomed.<sup>8</sup> (Figure 3)

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. <https://www.lindenlab.de/en> (accessed 28 May 2020).

The project is divided into eight experimental fields; with the exception of LAB 5, each focuses on one regionally defined section of the collection. Examples of these are:

LAB 1: “Museums and Indigenous Societies – New Forms of Cooperation” has already taken place in collaboration with the Kayan and Kayaw Literature and Culture Central Committees in Myanmar. The two committees each chose two representatives to take part in this LAB: Khun Myo Aung and Khun Vincentio Besign from the Kayan Literature and Culture Central Committee, and Olivia Musu and Patricio Doei from the Kayaw Literature and Culture Central Committee. They worked together with Dr Georg Noack, curator for South and Southeast Asia at the Linden-Museum. (Figure 4) In two workshops in Myanmar, the participants first of all discussed forms of co-collecting and arranged for objects to be produced using traditional craft techniques; some of these items were acquired by the Linden-Museum. During a subsequent four-week residency at the Linden-Museum, several discussions and workshops were held on the topics of conservation, communication, marketing and exhibition development. As part of a two-day symposium involving guests and members of the diaspora, participants discussed their experience of cooperation between museums and representatives of indigenous societies in the development of exhibition concepts. And finally, an exhibition concept developed by our partners in Myanmar was integrated into the permanent exhibition devoted to Southeast Asia. This was a “community-based” exhibition of the type described by Ruth Phillips,<sup>9</sup> where the museum merely provided the infrastructure.

LAB 2: “New ways of provenance research and their mediation” aims to use the Carlos Holz Collection, which holds objects from the culture of the Mapuche people in Chile, to familiarise visitors with provenance research in an engaging manner. Viewers will be invited to make their own connections between the exhibited objects and the excerpts from inventories, acquisition books and letters that are displayed in a ver-

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<sup>9</sup> Ruth Phillips, *Museum Pieces. Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums*, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011, pp. 194ff.



*Figures 3,4: Lab Entrance and Lab 1. Copyright Linden-Museum Stuttgart.  
Photograph by: Dominik Draschow*

tical file, along with the records of the different steps undertaken by a provenance researcher, and can thus retrace the development of a collection.

LAB 4: “Entangled: Stuttgart – Afghanistan. Relationships in the past and present” For this LAB, a public appeal was launched in order to set up a working group of individuals from Stuttgart, who may or may not have a personal connection to Afghanistan. The participants will explore the links between Afghanistan and the collections of the Linden-Museum Stuttgart. In a number of workshops involving guests from Afghanistan, they will critically examine selected areas of the collections and their provenance. This Lab, in particular, will experiment with participatory formats that allow everyone involved to contribute in their own way – whether it is by creating art, carrying out research or providing personal narratives.

LAB 5: “(in) relationships / challenging / (un)learning / breaking open” is a supra-regional project that addresses themes of language and space in the context of a museum. Topics such as the use of non-discriminatory language, simple language and visual language(s) will come under critical scrutiny.

The LindenLABs offer us the chance to experiment with different forms of engagement, over and above selective participatory contributions, and to develop a range of perspectives, meanings and interpretations in collaboration with other interested parties. These diverse approaches will provide the basis for a reorientation of the museum, whereby participation is understood as more than simply an enrichment of existing museum practice.

The LABs also provide an opportunity to improve the accessibility of the collections. This is particularly important as it is an area where many ethnographic museums, including the Linden-Museum, fall short, having not yet completed the digitisation of their holdings.

As part of the project “LindenLAB Participation, Provenance, Presentation”, the Linden-Museum hosted the conference “The New Museum.

Das neue Museum.  
The new museum.

# DAS NEUE

Eintritt frei  
Free entry

Ideen für das ethnologische Museum der Zukunft  
Ideas for the Ethnological Museum of the Future

# THE

28.—29.  
02.2020

Eine Konferenz des Linden-Museums  
im Hospitalhof Stuttgart  
A conference by the Linden-Museum  
at Hospitalhof Stuttgart

# MUSEUM

[www.lindenlab.de/konferenz](http://www.lindenlab.de/konferenz)

Goldpatent  
1873  
Baden-Württemberg  
Königliches Patentamt Stuttgart

LINDEN-MUSEUM STUTTGART  
Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde

Figure 5: 'The New Museum': Ideas for the Ethnological Museum of the Future, Conference Brochure, February 2020

Ideas for the Ethnological Museum of the Future” on 28 and 29 February 2020 (Figure 5).

International experts presented and discussed progressive proposals for ethnographic museum practice, with regard to outstanding museum architecture, new museum concepts and the role of ethnographic museums in cities and societies. This conference also gave us an opportunity to present our first ideas for the reorientation of the Linden-Museum to a wider audience, and to invite discussion on this topic. Various formats were used to document the questions and expectations put forward by audience members, and these contributions will inform our subsequent deliberations. Further participatory formats of this kind are planned for the future.

2. The second example of a new format is our permanent exhibition “Where is Africa?”, which was curated by Dr Sandra Ferracuti and opened in March 2019. The exhibition is divided into three sections. The first room examines the role of the museum in the appropriation of objects during the colonial era. It highlights the contrast between the “passion for collecting” and the lack of background information, which stems from the fact that this was, unfortunately, not collected in conjunction with the objects. The second room illustrates how the functionality and significance of objects is often lost when they are no longer combined with movement or performance, and traces the close ties between the Linden-Museum and the region of Oku in Cameroon. The third room focuses on the present day, revealing connections between Africa and Germany through numerous parallel narratives. (Figure 6)

With its many subjective narratives, the exhibition rejects the notion of the museum as a place where objective knowledge is transferred. It describes the close links between Germany and Africa, and in doing so encourages visitors to think about attributions and stereotypes. To avoid the reduction of complex societies on the basis of only a few objects, and to counter the assumption that cultures are fixed entities, the exhibition does not make any ethnic attributions.





*Figure 6: 'Where is Africa?'  
Copyright Linden-Museum Stuttgart. Photograph by: Harald Völkl*

A crucial aspect of this presentation are the views and contributions provided by the societies of origin, as well as by Stuttgart residents with African heritage, who were involved from the outset in the conception and interpretation of the exhibition, as well as in the preparation of all the texts. Those texts which were written by representatives of the societies of origin are credited to their respective authors. The same applies to the voices of the diaspora in Stuttgart, which were incorporated via members of the Advisory Board for the Representation of African Collections (ABRAC). This advisory board, which was founded in 2016 and is comprised of Stuttgart residents of African heritage, played a crucial role in the development of the presentation. Its members discussed the project with museum staff and brought their personal views into the conception, implementation and communication of the exhibition. They continue to be important partners for the Linden-Museum in all matters relating to our Africa collection, as well as in the debate on colonialism.

Building on many years of collaboration with the ABRAC, Ms Ferracuti was able to challenge the museum's prerogative of interpretation and to integrate alternative views and readings into our museum practice.

### THE LINDEN-MUSEUM OF THE FUTURE

So what could the Linden-Museum of the future look like? We don't know that yet.

We are still in the process of developing a new museum format for Stuttgart. Our initial ideas and concepts can be outlined as follows:

We want

- a museum that addresses fundamental themes of humanity, such as notions of society, identity, cultural transformation, religious beliefs or globalisation, in a clear and respectful manner, and is at the same time a place where people feel welcome and enjoy visiting;
- a museum that critically examines its history and its role in society, and offers members of this society new perspectives and alternative interpretations, also in terms of rethinking their own identity;
- a museum that is committed to handling the objects in its collections in a responsible and transparent manner, both in terms of its exhibition practice and its storage policies;
- a place of multivocality where multi-perspective negotiation of identity, transcultural dynamics and global connections takes place, and which is not afraid to depart from conventional structures and concepts;
- a museum that defines itself as a place of encounter, a place where knowledge is shared between scholars, researchers, communities, citizens' initiatives, the urban population and our visitors. The museum collections are at the centre of these negotiation processes. They offer limitless potential to establish and develop transcultural relations;

– a place of questions rather than one of confirmations, attributions or answers. A museum that challenges the notion of objective knowledge transfer with a claim to truth, and instead tells many subjective stories, including narratives of conflicts and contradictions.

There are still some challenges to address and hurdles to overcome on our way to finding the Linden-Museum of the future. The existing, rather inflexible structures of a museum often stand in the way of such a radical reorientation. If we are going to put multi-perspective formats and dynamic relational processes at the centre of our museum practice, then our operating conditions will need to be adapted accordingly. Among the aspects that will have to be considered are additional financial resources and personnel requirements, the recognition that more time has to be devoted to such activities, the introduction of fair remuneration for participation, and the modification of budgets to cover the cost of visits by representatives of the societies of origin to Germany.

One particularly crucial aspect, in my opinion, is the need to establish support programmes where the representatives of the societies of origin can apply to carry out projects with partners in Germany, and in which they themselves define the content. An equal partnership is difficult to achieve if project funding only comes from the German museums. These kinds of support programmes would also place greater emphasis on the added value of collaboration for the cooperation partners, and less emphasis on the museums.

Dynamic processes are difficult to represent in conventional exhibition displays, which is why it is important to look for new and more flexible forms of presentation, which would allow changes to be made in a less time-consuming manner and without incurring high costs.

Ethnographic museums – including the Linden-Museum Stuttgart – are standing at an important crossroads. More than ever before, they are in the media and political spotlight and have a unique opportunity to implement a radical reorientation. If they are prepared to make changes, they can play a key role in developing a new memory culture for Germany's society of immigration. But can ethnographic museums

actually achieve this? I feel very confident that the Linden-Museum, with its new approaches to participation and presentation, is well on the way to rethinking its historically European orientation and becoming a “post-ethnographic museum”.

## Remaking the Museum after Colonialism

As we take this opportunity to think about the contested nature of objects in old colonial museums, as well as the implications and opportunities of new understandings of ‘museum’, we also need to consider how much the world has changed since the modern museum and its fundamental features first emerged. The creation of a world after colonialism might have occurred for the most part in political terms. However, we are still deeply immersed in the epistemic struggle to change the colonial frames through which we understand societies and people, as well as institutions such as museums through which the societies and people of the world have been collected, classified and made knowable. And we all live with the legacies of colonial violence that accompanied the birth of the modern museum, which led to the appropriation of African artworks and artefacts that fuelled the development of ethnographic museums. Far from being the institution of care as proclaimed by museum discourses, we are learning just how much museums were part of the weaponry of death (Hicks 2020).

Here I want to argue that the frames of the stewardship of collections for future generations may be insufficient to maintain and defend the old museum in the face of powerful new arguments in favour of restitution and new approaches to museum as process and the interrogative museum (Rassool 2006; Silverman 2015; Karp and Kratz 2015). These need to accompany urgent programmes of restitution through which African artefacts and artworks will be returned. But restitution is not just the geographic reorganisation of collections. It represents new possibilities for rethinking what we mean by museum. It is in these restitution claims, consultations and negotiations that the new concept of museum of process will be found, as a way of settling the dilemmas of the unsettled objects in the modern museum of coloniality.

The museum is not only an institution of modernity and ordered citizenship, but is the primary institutional form of empire and coloniality. It was made and is being remade and adapted through both sides of colonialism's history: by a rapacious and violent empire of plunder and pacification, as well as by empire as 'benevolent colonisation', humanitarianism and trusteeship over people and things. This was a simultaneous expression of collecting, documenting and governing ('safeguarding' and 'preserving') things and people through appropriation and stewardship. The administrative and classificatory systems of the museum through which the world was made knowable drew very emphatic distinctions between people of culture and those of nature. The natural history museum (which in some places included ethnology and physical anthropology) became the site of collecting and displaying the material culture of subject people as well as the site for collecting and documenting the physical anthropology of race.

Humanitarianism was not simply a masked 'packaging' of empire and colonialism. Rather compassion and sympathy was a means of solidifying social hierarchies. Moreover, Empire's humanitarianism had another dimension to it, namely a gesture of rescue and recuperation, especially of species and life forms deemed to be in danger of extinction or disappearance. In the case of the 'bushmen', this humanitarianism gave birth to the first significant representations of material culture in southern Africa, in the form of the 19th Century records of /Xam language and folklore that was later constituted as an archive, known later as the Bleek-Lloyd collection. Yet all this work conducted in the name of humanitarianism was completely bound up with the plundered, racialised body of the bushman, perhaps the central element in constituting the discourse of museum recuperation and heritage preservation.

Modern collecting museums in societies as diverse as Amsterdam, Toronto, Cologne and Berlin have embarked upon projects to rethink the relationship between collections and people in their nations and overseas, with perceptive awareness of wider contests of coloniality, race and history. We also take note of the emergence of important new national museums of history in the US, South Africa and elsewhere,

where the museum has become a means of asserting a belonging to a new nation in the face of previous denialism or active exclusion, or indeed as part of the cultural proclamation and narration of a new nation. New history museums have also been created as site museums or memory museums or more properly as ‘politics of history’ museums, where the category of museum has often been constituted in the defence of rights to land or as part of the process of transitional justice.

In this work of the defence of community and place, museums have also been marshalled as part of the democratic organs of the people, as a social movement in their fight against injustice, impunity and forgetting, and even just to build the resources of community itself. Often these new site museums or community museums have embraced the domain of museums without substantial tangible material culture, but with a world of the experiential and immaterial, as performed voice and body that speak to deep histories of oppression and the desire of a new self-authorship and an internal expertise. These are exactly the new projects of the self-activity or museum-making that we need to embrace and advocate as part of the process of deepening democracy in the world in the 21st century.

## MUSEUMS AND COLONIALITY

South African society has experienced very difficult histories of multiple colonialisms as well as the social engineering of a rapacious, violent apartheid regime that divided its people into races and ethnic groups. In many ways South African history can be understood as a deep, historical contest between the project of race and ethnicity of successive colonial states and apartheid, on the one hand, and the project of imagining a society without race and ethnicity (Rassool 2019). Sections of the South African liberation movement that emerged during the 20th century developed a substantial body of thinking about non-racialism and anti-racism, especially during the period between the 1930s and the 1980s. These ideas have enabled us to understand race, ethnicity and the administration of people in historical ways. We have also come to understand how each category of race was created as part of

this administration and governmentality, and how ethnicity itself was invented through native administration as part of the processes of rule.

The museum is one of the sites where race was made. A few years ago, I was part of a group of colleagues working on Namibia and South Africa that completed a project on the South African 'empire', with the publication of a special issue of the *Journal of Southern African Studies* (Volume 41, 3, 2015). This project showed how it is possible to understand southern African history through the idea of the constitution of a regional empire of power and authority, instead of through the conventional framework of the making of nations (Henrichsen, Miescher, Rassool & Rizzo 2015). Research conducted in this project also emphasised that the museum needs to be understood as an epistemology, a system of representation, and not merely as a collection or exhibition. Indeed, the museum was the very institution of empire and coloniality, marked by categories of ethnicity, and systems of classification and knowledge hierarchy (Rassool 2015; see also Bennett 1995 & 2004). And as is well known, the fundamental classification was that between cultural history and ethnography; between the material culture of those deemed to be civilised and the material culture of those deemed to be 'primitive'.

The major challenge is to shift from an understanding of colonialism as time and place and as formal system of rule to an appreciation of coloniality as an epistemology, as a politics of knowledge. This would enable a much wider understanding of coloniality as embedded in deep structures of knowledge, in the character and shape of disciplines in the museum and the university. Colonialism would then be appreciated as more than merely a topic of history, as was the approach in the exhibition on German colonialism held in 2016 at the German Historical Museum in Berlin, notwithstanding how powerful this exhibition was. The claim made by art historian Horst Bredekamp that Germany remained relatively untouched by colonialism because of its brief colonial experience can therefore be dismissed as absurd. This claim lacked an appreciation of just how significantly German museums and universities have continued to be marked by coloniality in peculiar ways



through the persistence of 19th century disciplinary systems and classificatory divisions.

As ethnographic museums in Cologne, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Hamburg and elsewhere have been undergoing processes of renovation, this has sometimes seen an openness to rethinking the work of the museum itself. Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt proved to be the setting of some of the most innovative thinking of the museum as laboratory, of artists in residence engaging with collections and of the idea of the postethnographic in the museum. Some ethnographic museums have laid emphasis on provenance research on their artefacts and artworks from 'colonial contexts', and on partnerships with and loans to museums in source societies. These approaches have tended to emphasise the entangled histories between African societies and their former colonisers, as well as methods of co-curatorship and object sharing.

However, following the report by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy to French president, Emmanuel Macron (Sarr and Savoy 2018), and a growing commitment to the restitution of African artworks and artefacts, it has been said that this emphasis on 'entanglement' might represent the perpetuation of neo-colonialism. While some curators in German ethnographic museums have expressed support for restitution, curators in small ethnographic museums in Britain, such as Horniman and Pitt Rivers Museums, have also stressed the necessity for restitution, especially in the light of how central museum collecting was to the project of colonial pacification in the late 19th century (Hicks 2020).

Berlin has perhaps been the setting of the most significant contests over colonial human remains collections, over the ethics of colonial collections, and of the persistence of colonial urban traces. Partly because of political pressure from German and African activists, museums in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany have already embarked upon projects to return African human remains, sometimes of victims of colonial violence, or from corpses or skeletons illegally removed from graves. This commitment started with returns to Namibia and is set to continue with returns to Rwanda, as well as other African societies that had been colonised by Germany such as Tanzania and Togo. And yet,

German museums still need to face the implications of the fact that in many cases, the scientists who had collected these remains, at the same time assembled material culture and documentation (film, images, sound recordings) as part of multidisciplinary expeditions. These collections had become separated from each other into separate disciplines and museums, and possibly also into contexts of injustice and liberal humanism. The time has indeed come for these to be considered together, with human remains those of missing persons, and with artefacts also being, in some ways, missing ancestors. The time has come to depart from the paradigm of liberal humanism.

Notwithstanding the shifting climate of museum debates in Europe, with increased acknowledgement of violence and growing willingness to conduct restitution work, the cultural authorities in Berlin have pressed ahead with the formation of the Humboldt Forum, that is set to bring the collections of the Dahlem Ethnological Museum together with those of Asian Art. In drawing upon a seemingly unproblematic 19th century intellectual history, the Humboldt Forum is set to perpetuate the colonial idea of grouping together the material culture and art of those described as ‘non-European’. In addition, the Humboldt Forum is also a project of belatedness, of being part of reimagining Berlin as a major European city, and of reasserting Germany’s position as ‘western’.

## REMAKING MUSEUMS IN SOUTH AFRICA

As with the colonial museum infrastructure into which the ethnographic museum was inserted in Europe, the South African museum system was also shot through with this classificatory system, characterised by a division between the people deemed to have culture and history, and those deemed only to have tribe as well as the physical features of race. The South African museum system was divided between museums of cultural history and ethnography, with the latter sometimes incorporated into natural history museums (Davison 1990). This museum inheritance posed challenges for healing a society from the ravages of colonialism and apartheid and for building a democratic,

non-racial society. How could these old, divided national museum collections, marked by a colonial classificatory division become museums of the new non-racial nation? What did non-racialism mean for the classification system, what did it mean for the museum infrastructure and what did it mean for the administration of collections and artefacts that had been segregated?

A new 'flagship' national museum was created in Cape Town out of an amalgamation of the old previously segregated national museum collections, and was named Iziko Museums of South Africa, with 'iziko' a Nguni word for the hearth of the home. As part of the amalgamation and the integration of the collections, a new collections division was created which was simply called 'social history' collections, and a new storage facility for these collections was created (Davison 2005; Rassool 2009). This new collections building was not merely a new store, but rather, became the site for an internationally significant epistemological project of taking previously segregated cultural history and ethnography collections, say of ceramics, and to do the collections management work of placing them within a single collections division. This epistemic work also has to pay attention to labelling and object biography in ways that remove administrative racism, while showing the history of race and ethnicity in labelling.

Many museums across the world hold significant collections from Southern African societies that continue to carry the offensive labels acquired during their acquisition and early entry in to the collection. These labels, such as 'Kaffir', the colonial label for Nguni-speaking people in the Eastern Cape at the time of their 19th century conquest by the British, present a challenge to museums as they find ways of according respect to societies from which their collections emanate. An opportunity is presented to these museums in South Africa and in other countries, to alter their offensive labels, but also to embark upon a project of thinking about the history of ethnic and ethnographic labelling as part of the cultural work of decolonisation.

Labels are not merely about a sense of authenticity; they are couched in the discourses of society and the object (Price 2013). The decolonisation

of museums may involve an enquiry into the ethics of acquisition, and into the relationship between collections and living, historical cultures. And it also involves a deep, critical, historical enquiry into the knowledge systems surrounding objects and collections, in an approach that questions colonial categories. The work of Hamilton and Leibhammer has shown how important this is for ‘untribing the archive’ in the case of South African collections and documentalities (Hamilton and Leibhammer 2017). We are also learning about the extent to which museum labels and documentation have concealed the violence of the acquisition of many artefacts and artworks.

Just as one problematises race and ethnicity in the history of the administration of persons, so one has to think historically about the categories of the administration of museum objects and collections. As much as we can identify how artificial and constructed ethnicity is, we need to be able to understand how ethnicity and ethnic categories themselves have history (Vail, ed 1991). And so we need to appreciate the history behind how the ethnic and ethnographic category of Zulu was made and how Zulu social formation can be understood historically outside of the simplistic framework of the *Mfecane* and state formation (Hamilton 1998). This will enable museums to rethink the category ‘Zulu’ in their collections management, not just for its historical accuracy, but for its cultural politics over time.

The museum has also been one of the sites in the making of the category of ‘Bushman’, and it is important for us to understand its work and that of the museum disciplines of physical and cultural anthropology in the history of bushmanisation. What that concept of Bushman has meant has changed over time from its earliest colonial creation as a reference to people without livestock, partly as a consequence of dispossession, and to people who in turn raided Boer homesteads for stolen livestock (Gordon 1992). This process culminated in the physical anthropological studies of the early 20th century, and the racial project of cast-making from the bodies of northern Cape farmworkers and shepherds, conducted in the name of anthropological and museum preservation (Davison 2001; Skotnes 2002).

Colonialism has also often had the effect of removing people from any sense of indigenous continuity with precolonial societies. It is important to understand how new expressions of a politics of indigeneity have been emerging in which people have sought to narrate their lives in new indigenous terms, and where this indigeneity is the basis of a new and aspiring modernity, sometimes even expressed as the ‘recovery’ of indigenous knowledge systems. For this, an older language of ethnography has often been employed, that draws upon the research and publications of the old colonial anthropologists for assistance. So while Khoisan indigenous identities were studied in the museum through the prism of racial type and the trope of disappearance, Bantu-speaking people were turned into ethnic groups through the work of anthropology and native administration (Rassool 2019). And notwithstanding their desires, it has not been possible for indigeneity to be claimed and expressed outside the frames of ethnography (Rassool 2009).

These have been some of the contradictions unfolding in South African museums, expressed most powerfully in the 1996 exhibition, *Miscast: Negotiating Khoisan History and Material Culture*, curated by artist and scholar Pippa Skotnes in the South African National Gallery. This exhibition sought to engage with the history of racialised cast-making and with the power of the infamous Bushman diorama that had been installed in the South African Museum in 1959-60, utilising the body casts of racial science made 50 years before. In this significant exhibition, Skotnes sought to counterpose the violence of the gun and the museum with recovered expressions of indigenous voices, as assembled by Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd from 19th century /Xam informants who had been imprisoned in the Breakwater prison in Cape Town on charges of stock theft (Skotnes 1996; Skotnes 2002).

Skotnes’s project failed to problematise these notions of ‘recovery’ and ‘rescue’ ascribed to the work of Bleek and Lloyd, and her concept of the museum remained couched in the discourse of atonement, preservation and stewardship, and its desires for trusteeship over people and objects (Rassool 2009). The *Miscast* project was also criticised for reproducing and repeating the very colonial representations of Khoisan people that

it had sought to problematise. In addition, the exhibition was met with new presentations of indigeneity as ethnicity, as neo-Khoisan groups sought to question the authority of the curator and the museum (*Southern African Review of Books*, 44, 1996). These presentations were part of broader neo-Khoisan demands for recognition of cultural dignity and for inclusion of traditional leaders into the system of traditional authorities from which they had been excluded. This represented a shift from being perceived as members of a disappearing race to wanting recognition as bearers of living ethnicity.

### REHUMANISING THE DEAD OF RACIAL SCIENCE

When you make a new national museum of a non-racial democracy, what do you do with the legacies of racial collecting and research? An important aspect of South African museum anthropology and collecting history involved supposed 'preservation' of the physical records of people deemed to be disappearing such as people labelled as 'Bushman', whom physical anthropologists saw as 'living fossils'. As a result of these impulses to preserve and collect, the buried bodies of the 'freshly dead' were purchased by museums from grave robbers. This trade in stolen human remains of early 20th century people lay at the heart of the making of the modern museum in South Africa, coinciding with the birth of the Union of South Africa as a new white nation in 1910. It also saw South African museums compete with their European counterparts for prior access to the remains of the stolen dead, as an expression of the South Africanisation of science. In addition to the trade in human remains of the recently dead, there is also evidence of the purchase of bodies of people before they died (Legassick and Rassool 2000).

As part of the transformation of the old museum collections, in Iziko Museums of South Africa, the collections of the dead whose remains had been stolen in these ways, or acquired for the purposes of racial research were deaccessioned from the collection under the terms of a new Human Remains Policy, set aside in special 'no access' stores until such time as a national policy on return and repatriation comes into operation. After the Bushman Diorama had been shut, a decision was

made that racialised body casts should also be considered as unethically acquired human remains. The experience of creating national cohesion and social healing through the return and reburial of the remains of Sara Baartman in 2002, and Klaas and Trooi Pienaar in 2012 was widely expected to influence a process of returning the dead from museums in South Africa (Rassool 2015). These returns would not merely be a roll-out of events of deracialisation, but would constitute the new content of the museum itself, with processes of return forming the basis of remaking museums themselves.

As the legacies of race and physical anthropology as science are attended to as part of the decolonisation of museums in South Africa, Iziko Museums has also shown that it is possible to rethink the value of the category of ethnography. It is not possible to make new postcolonial nations on the basis of the ethnographic museum. The experiences of Ghana and Uganda and other countries demonstrate the dilemmas of national museums which remain dormant, with their frozen, dusty exhibitions trapped in old ethnographic languages and categories. The creation of social history collections at Iziko Museums has shown one way in which old museums with inherited collections can be set on a post-ethnographic path, so that people can recognise themselves in museums outside of colonialism's categories of race and ethnicity.

In remaking itself as a museum of the democratic nation, and immersing itself in an emerging politics of restitution, what also needs attention are the legacies of the South African empire, of Namibian and other Southern African collections in Iziko Museums of South Africa and other South African museums. As much as Iziko Museums stands to gain from future restitutions to South Africa from European collections, either as recipient museum or mediating institution for community-based returns, there is much to be gained from decolonisation in the other direction, of unburdening itself of collections acquired through South Africa's domination of Namibia and regional hegemony. South Africa will emerge as a collections claiming society as well as a holding society from which collections will be requested. The decolonisation of South Africa is indeed a multifaceted and ongoing process.

## THE MUSEUM AS PROCESS

That museums nowadays are much more about the mobilisation of people and the creation of civic forums for discussion and debate is powerfully shown in the cultural and memory work of community history museums in South Africa that emerged from the mid-1990s. The foremost example of this new museum of process is the District Six Museum in Cape Town, which came into existence as a site museum and a politics of history museum. It was created to defend the land of District Six, from which people had been forcibly removed under apartheid, and to defend the narrative of that experience, through site interpretive work. This museum that has developed alongside a complex project of healing the community through land restitution has also deliberately set itself the task to rethink the city of Cape Town outside of the categories of race, with the challenge 'to build a city of people, not of races' (Soudien 2001).

The District Six Museum has worked with the concept of museum not as collection but as site inscription, as memory work, and as transactions of knowledge. In recent years its main methods of interpretation have involved site visits and commemorative walks, utilising the resources of memory, trying to ensure that a land restitution process under way pays attention to questions of memory. Here the museum is understood as the process of knowledge formation, as part of the resources of reconstituting society, where this is the museum not as the object and not as the exhibition. Yet the District Six museum has been through quite a substantial process of museumisation and formalisation, as it acquired the responsibilities of stewardship and care of collections, of objects and images of ordinary lives as well as recordings of social memory and cultural expression (Rassool 2006).

This work of regarding histories of displacement and return, of dehumanisation and the resources of recovery is part of the new museum work of remaking society and of rethinking the museum beyond its modern impetus to discover, document and classify. This is the new museum of conversation and interrogation between local, national and international expertise, between the oral and literate, and between



academic and public scholarship. A focus on the 'politics of history' enables a new approach to museums that considers varying pasts and more than anything else offers a method to expanding the horizons of museums beyond the canon. As the District Six Museum has shown, new African history museums and historical museologies need not be framed through monumentalism nor nationalist heroic narratives.

The postethnographic museum and the museum of process both point to the possibility that the modern museum as the world has known it, which emerged as part of the making of the modern person, and that coincided with the colonisation of the world, may have outlived its value. This postethnographic museum can only be the outcome of a sustained engagement with the basic museum work of collecting, conservation, exhibition and education in ways that enter into battle with the colonial concepts of race and ethnic group that seem almost naturalized and frozen into who we are. In general, it is critical to think about the connections between the administration of people and the administration of artefacts in the museum, and to rethink society and to rethink the museum at the same time.

What we are talking about in this questioning of race, ethnicity and ethnography is a new critical citizenship and what it means to be human in a postcolonial world. In considering how the museum is changing we need to understand how old collecting museums have been challenging themselves and how new, interrogative museums of process have begun to expand museum horizons to embrace the downtrodden, the oppressed and exploited of the world whose experiences might previously have been confined and contained through colonial ethnography and even a denial of coevalness. This focus on local and deep histories of oppression, displacement and survival, while guarding against the triumphalism of nationalism, needs to consider the ways it offers new understandings of what museums are as well as the possibilities for new museologies for the 21st century.

Posing questions about the museum should not merely be about expunging its rapacious histories, and shoring up the vestiges of a remaining benevolence, framed as preservation and stewardship. Rather, it

requires questions posed about the syndrome of preservation itself. The most progressive edge of that reformed, benevolent museum is the 'contact zone' (Clifford 1997, based on Pratt 1991), as produced through co-curatorship and of science and indigeneity working together. This model of a reformed museum retained the classificatory order and hierarchy of empire, but relied upon greater participation by 'source communities', with the museum placed on a more 'ethical' footing.

This age of an ethical engagement with human subjects and of a new ethics of collecting has seen the emergence of new programmes to prevent museums from benefiting from the illicit traffic in artefacts and a significant move by many museums of culture and nature to 'cleanse' themselves of their human remains collections and of other 'sensitive collections', deemed to have been collected unethically or acquired as part of a context of injustice. Sometimes these changes have taken the form of a partial 'cleansing' through merely moving the store of human remains or sensitive collections, and creating cultural centres jointly managed by science and the indigenous. Such processes of reform might have created more socially responsive and ethically grounded museums, but they have left the empire of the museum intact.

Transforming the museum requires embarking upon projects of restitution as a methodology of rethinking and remaking museums. It also requires understanding the history of the museum as the locus of empire and coloniality in all of its forms, and to embark on the difficult work of interrogating its collecting histories and epistemologies. The museum needs to be reconceptualised outside evolutionary frames and the impulses of preservation and atonement. The postcolonial museum may indeed require the inauguration of the postmuseum itself.

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*Molemo Moiloa*

## nto>ntu: Reimagining Relational Infrastructures of Museums in Africa

An African Museum is, in a sense, a kind of incongruity. Because a museum is, in its foundation and principle, inherently European. Accumulation, conquest, extraction, materialism and consumption, sexism, racism and dehumanization form very much a part of the principles of European cultural practice that the museum is built upon. Instantiation of these principles for the museum rests in the nucleus of 'the object'. And it is within rethinking the object – particularly in the coming restitution of material and ancestral culture back to the African continent – that new imaginations of the Museum in Africa become possible. This text considers the potential of what a move from physical infrastructures to social ones, might enable for museums in Africa. Taking from AbdouMaliq Simone's (2004) concept of people as infrastructure, I argue for a reimagination of the place of the object – repatriated or local – as of value primarily in its potential for the social and relational infrastructures that it might enable. And that in doing so we might completely rethink the role and form of the museum in Africa, and perhaps even begin to conjure the first inklings of what an African museum might be.

To think the museum away from the object is to think the museum away from its colonial inheritance. The object as nucleus of the museum is also the holder of complex colonial inheritances that decolonial practices seek to undo. First and foremost the object serves as signifier for a kind of materialist fixation so particular to the obsessive accumulation of colonial era 'discovery', and even more so of the so-called 'punitive expedition'. The curator, the epitome of the museum worker, whose title stems from the Latin root word for 'care', emerged too from this obsession, as the 'carer' of the object. The problematics of care for the object as the central capacity of museum labour is increasingly raised

in international museums discourse. Yesomi Umolu (2020), in her 15 point list *on the limits of care and knowledge* within the museum states at number 11 that, “To acknowledge the limits of your knowing and caretaking is an important step.” She raises a concern over the museum’s historical care of the object taking precedence (sometimes even violently) over care for the humans from whom these objects emanate – a colonial and capitalist inheritance of value for things over people, particularly people of colour.

This history of the object and its associated obsession of accumulation permeates much of contemporary life and its urgencies. One important example is global concern with the planetary challenges we face, and the decolonial unlearnings we must undertake to avert total climate crisis. The western colonial inheritance of accumulation, consumption and extraction lie at the heart of our current planetary crisis and of the challenges that lie ahead in driving an effective ‘extinction rebellion’. For museums, the concerns over climate change often manifests in talk of less flights, green energies for internal climate control systems etc. (Richardson 2018) but are rarely brave enough to engage with the very object foundation of the museums existence. However, in the space of Natural History Museums, a real conversation about the problematics of the museum’s tradition of accumulation has become far more severe. The ICOM Code of Ethics for Natural History Museums (2013) raises distinctly the need for museums to consider, and then doubly consider, the need to increase their collections considering the impact such actions have had on the natural world. The planetary impacts of museum collecting for Natural History Museums may be more obvious. But the direct link between cultures of extractive and consumptive practices and museum collecting should be clear to all museums. As more and more museums in the minority world find their storerooms too full, with some of them even flooding or on (wild)fire due to climate change (Rea and Halperin 2017), museums are faced with the realities of accumulation’s – and collection’s – complicity in the realities of our planetary crisis.



This is of course not to say that others – or Africans specifically – have not had strong roles for the material in their cultural practices. But rather to say that the special flavour of European colonial materialism in particular, has had a distinct role to play in the ugly realities of our present moment. The concept of the fetish for example, is a European invention often foisted upon ‘Others’ as a kind of material obsession and idol worship specific to the object. Writer such as A.A. Cheng have discussed this in detail (2006), situating fetishism within a psycho-analytic frame of colonial eroticism and fantasy. Flynn and Barringer in their book *Colonialism and the Object* (1998) discuss the western invention of the fetish, and infer that it is a quintessential example of “how three-dimensional artefacts can mediate the power relations that underlie the colonial project” (1998, 3). The way we understand the role of the object in the museum must then, be understood entirely within the psychologies of accumulation, conquest, extraction, materialism and consumption, sexism, racism and dehumanization of colonialism and its episteme. As stated by Françoise Vergès on the proposed development of the new Maison des civilisations et de l’unité réunionnaise (MCUR), “to us, the accumulation of objects destined to celebrate the wealth of a nation belonged to an economy of predation, looting defeated peoples or exploiting the riches of others. It belonged to an economy of consumption that invested the object with narcissistic meaning, making visible one’s identity and social status”(Vergès 2014, 25). As such, Vergès and others looking to imagine this new museum sought to create “a museum without objects” as a way of rethinking the museum in Africa.

Vergès points to the fact that, in recognising the role that objects play in the colonial imagination and its object accumulation centred sense of value, the museum in Africa must question what the object means for it. And in understanding the problematic stories – such as those of the fetish – told about African histories of object relations, there is work to be done to rewrite these in ways that imagine away from this colonial inheritance. This asks specific questions too, of restitution, which continues to be framed within minority world discourse as a matter of *return of objects*. Yet if we understand the focus on the object to be an

epistemic imaginary of the colonial project, then we must ask in what ways restitution processes do not assume this mentality again. We must ask in what ways a restitution that emanates from African epistemes might completely reimagine the place and purpose of the object.

AbdouMaliq Simone, in his formative text *People as Infrastructure* (2004) on the nature of low-income, systemic infrastructures in cities such as Johannesburg, potentially offers some thoughts for an alternative. He states;

“Infrastructure is commonly understood in physical terms, as reticulated systems of highways, pipes, wires, or cables. These modes of provisioning and articulation are viewed as making the city productive, reproducing it, and positioning its residents, territories, and resources in specific ensembles where the energies of individuals can be most efficiently deployed and accounted for. By contrast, I wish to extend the notion of infrastructure directly to people’s activities in the city. African cities are characterised by incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used”. (407)

If we translate this idea of people as infrastructure in the city into the museum, we challenge our supposition of the museum as objects and climate control systems and large imposing buildings. Instead, we are able to use existing forms of African life and meaning making to imagine a move away from reticulated physical structures to reticulated social ones. And in doing so, enable a museum that can be as ‘incessantly flexible, mobile and provisional’ as Africans might need it to be. Importantly Simone points to the principle that people as infrastructure specifically refers to “collaboration among residents seemingly marginalized from and immiserated by urban life” (407), which is to say those Africans not well served by the inheritances of ‘proper’ infrastructures who must, therefore, find alternatives. A social and relational infrastructure then, is a possible way to think away from the physical, the accumulated, and the left behind by our colonial ancestors. People as museum infrastructure potentially becomes a move away from the grand building and the stuff inside it; and towards the infrastructure of relationship, economy and social value. Museums perhaps function not

as houses of civilization, but rather as central nodes from which a network of social knowledge frameworks, meaning making and collective education might emerge.

The concept of people as infrastructure also finds deep resonance with existing deep epistemes of knowledge and society making on this continent. 'ntu' is the root word that grounds humanist traditions, practice and ontologies for much of so-called sub-saharan Africa. These humanist traditions – completely independent of the anthropocentric humanist philosophies of the occident – frame a centering of people as framework (read structure) of societal, economic, ecological and ethical practice and being (Shumba 2011, Letseka 2000 and many others). For many Bantu languages, 'nto' is the root of the word for 'thing'. While not connotative of anything denigratory, 'nto' certainly doesn't hold the depth of social and intellectual value of 'ntu'. As an established social and philosophical standing, these humanist traditions that put people at the centre of infrastructures serve as a well worn framework for thinking the museum in Africa.

How might this play out in practice? A commitment to the role of the museum within community social and political reproduction is certainly the first start. And a number of museums on the African continent offer important examples of this. The Uganda National Museum's travelling interactive exhibitions and oral history programmes are one such example. Differently, the District Six museum's continued commitment to the social and political values of its founding, creates a space that is as much museum as it is community mobilization centre. There are of course other such examples. I would argue however, that the momentum towards restitution on the African continent potentially offers us even greater potential to reimagine the functioning of the museum in Africa.

We might benefit from understanding the role of the museum in restitution as an infrastructure of people and social relations – and a central node from which this is facilitated. We then might be able to decenter the 'thing' that is the object, and focus more on the mobile, provisional, relations of meaning making that encircle it. Restitution then

becomes less about the return of the ‘thing’, and certainly less about returning them to the physical infrastructures of museums. Instead, we might ground the process of restitution in social linkages, meaning for its people, the healing of scars, enabling reconnections to cultures and histories.

We could focus on the telling of stories – as a distinctly relational and agentive practice. As is invoked in the name of the Keleketla! Library (Allen 2020), an art space based in Johannesburg, the telling of stories requires call and response, a kind of collective narrative making (‘keleketla!’ is the response called out to the story teller in response to the story teller looking to confirm you are still listening). In so doing we would tell new stories, write revisionist histories and rewrite them again. For Keleketla! this manifests in understanding heritage as living, and related to the lives of young people. In their years long heritage project that used the site of their library – the Drill Hall and venue of the historic treason trial – to frame a range of programmes. The programmes that sought to write the stories of now – and particularly of children based in the inner-city of Johannesburg, in relation to the long arm of history that still informs these childrens’ present. Storytelling of all forms were reinforced as a legitimate and real site of meaning making in relation to the physical remnants of this real history that was the Drill Hall. Intergenerational dialogues, writing workshops, dance training, even the development of children-run talk shows, all enabled these young people to explore the power of telling stories, but also empowered these young people to draw straight lines from this history to their present realities (Hlasane 2014). Rassool and Witz (2008) point to the need to ‘make histories’ – a term that points to the agentive, productive and active process of heritage and history telling. They suggest that “how knowledge is negotiated, circulated and contested amongst different constituencies, publics and academic locales are important to making histories” (2008, 15). This fluid and mobile approach makes claims for multiple voices, reimagining the roles of ‘sources’ and the idea of the expert historian, questioning knowledge in ways that don’t seek to replace one false truth with another but remain fluid. The Zambian Women’s History Museum does just this, hold-

ing Wikipedia workshops to populate the web with stories of African women of history and developing podcasts and animated videos that share these narratives. Their forms of story telling are regularly digital, contemporary and use open data formats to encourage the layering of additional layers on top of them. Their podcast series is also animated in videos on YouTube and given amplification through Ted talks. Their strategy is to use contemporary forms of narrative making, story telling and value delineation to share indigenous knowledges and create a critical mass for these knowledges in the public realm.

We need new skills. To encourage a social space for the making of histories, and the making of meaning by museums, the historical kind of 'care' of the curator must shift. A people as museum infrastructure approach understands that care must shift to people rather than to objects, it understands that the making of histories requires negotiation and contestation, it questions the expert and the idea of the authentic or truth. We are looking for skills that enable the provisional and the incomplete, that makes spaces for multiple voices, for anger and for pain, but also for healing and exploration. The museum workers of the people as infrastructure museum are still carers but with different understandings of what it means to care. They are social workers, healers, faith and religious workers, storytellers and griots.

We might empty out the halls, and leave the walls blank. A statement by Prime Minister Cameron stated that if all the objects were returned from the British Museum then the museum would be empty (Prince 2010). Njoki Ngumi of the Nest Collective, based in Nairobi, recalls how this idea of the empty museum was so arresting for the collective that it inspired a series of short stories and a multi-year restitution project (Ngumi 2020). This image of the empty museum is exciting because it asks of us, what is the meaning of the museum that does not rely on the colonial violence of object obsession to offer something to society. If the museum were emptied of all of its objects what could it be? And which people would still be there, committed to working through the difficult questions of what role a museum plays in a more just future.

Thinking the museum as social infrastructure challenges our imagination to refuse the violent inheritance of the museum of our colonial ancestors. It summons us to dream up other ways. But these other ways are also grounded in our own histories, epistemes and existing practices. To move from 'nto' to 'ntu', the 'thing' to the 'human' is a substantially destabilising proposal for the museum in Africa, at least as far as we have operated up to this point. But it is also not foreign, or strange or difficult to grasp for a museum in Africa that identifies itself through an ontology of its place. There are many museum professionals, cultural projects and creative practitioners already testing out alternatives that lean in this direction. There are ways of remembering and memorializing, skills of social practice and imagination that we already have. And these ways offer us localized and pre-colonised strategies that might enable a museum in Africa that is African, but also of the contemporary moment and responding to the urgencies of now. Like Simone's people as infrastructure, we might look around us at how ordinary life finds its way through the morass of the post-colony, and discover familiar paths forward.

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Chao Maina

## African Museums in the Digital Age:

An Exploration of the Continent's Museums at the  
Crossroads of Curatorial Change and Technology

In exploring the founding legacies of museums in Africa, Emmanuel Arinze observes that “*African museums were created to house the curios of a ‘tribal’ people and to satisfy the curiosity of the élite citizenry almost to the total exclusion of the local people who produced the objects and materials.*”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is impossible to look at the formation of the museum sector in Africa devoid of the colonial backdrop in which they were formed. It is within this backdrop that the agenda of the postcolonial African museum emerges, an agenda that seeks to dismantle deeply embedded narratives while seeking to build a critical understanding of what museum practice means in an African context.

Today this continuing push to decolonise museums is at once spurred and inhibited by an increasingly digital world; a world where access to information is decentralized and new narratives and new actors have risen to challenge previously entrenched ideas of African history. Like an oracle standing at a crossroad, the digital offers infinite possibilities to those who embrace it or obsolescence to those who don’t. It is within this changing landscape that a key question emerges, “What potential does technology hold for African museums?”

Africa’s approach to incorporating digital heritage within museum practice is dependent on four key pillars: Audiences, skills, policies and infrastructure. To understand how digital technologies can alter museum practice, we first begin by asking what is perhaps the most critical question: Who will the technology serve?

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Nnakenyi Arinze, ‘African museums: the challenge of change,’ *Museum International* 50, No. 1 (1998): pp. 31-37



Globally, the impact of technology on audience-experience in regard to history, culture and arts, has been profound. Production and sharing of the information behind the objects and materials in the museum now focuses on creating multiple ways for users to interact with cultural knowledge in the museum or at home. A 2016 global survey on the digitisation of arts and heritage found that 52% of audiences refute the notion that having access to culture digitally reduces their need to physically visit cultural events and exhibitions. While 36% say that the ability to access information online, leads them to physically engage with culture where they might have otherwise neglected to.<sup>2</sup>

Yet when we speak of understanding audiences, we are not just referring to their internet speeds and levels of smartphone access, we are referring to a holistic understanding of what enables or prevents African audiences from engaging with cultural institutions. This means actively being aware that the legacies of exclusion which manifest in the physical world can be replicated in the digital world. As we venture into this alternate universe where barriers to access are broken down and where audiences and institutions operate on a level playing field, the relevance of the museum is predicated on it being a facilitator for cultural conversations not a dictator of them.

Already we see a staggering appetite for cultural content online. History Kenya, a privately run online account curating pictures and events on Kenyan history boasts a combined audience of more than 162,000 across multiple social media platforms, with more than double the reach when content is reshared or reposted. In Uganda, platforms such as History in Progress, a private initiative to digitise and share historical photos from private collections boasts an audience of 20,000 on Facebook alone; while ‘*Leading ladies*’ a Zambian podcast series on women’s histories has received over 90,000 views less than two years after it was launched.

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<sup>2</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit, *A New Age of Culture: The Digitisation of Arts and Heritage*, commissioned by Google, London et al., 2016.

These numbers are impressive in comparison to the number of physical visitors museums receive but what they ultimately tell us is that there is a huge opportunity to share and promote historical and cultural content to African audiences outside traditional forms of engagement. The ability to draw in new audiences through digital approaches will therefore be a key performance area for museums moving forward.

A stellar example of using digital media to draw in audiences can be seen in the *Museum of British Colonialism* (MBC) initiative, an online, volunteer collective from Kenya and the UK that works to explore inclusive ways of communicating British colonial history. Working across two different continents with limited resources, the team chose to use digital tools and digital media as the primary way to present, disseminate and explore colonial history in Kenya. One of MBC's key projects has been to digitally map and visualise detention camps set up by the British in Kenya during the colonial period.

The historical context for their work is set in October 1952 when the British colonial administration in Kenya declared a state of emergency in response to the Mau Mau uprising, an armed rebellion which called for independence and the return of land to the native people of Kenya. In the name of retaining colonial control and 'rehabilitating' those in favour of an independent nation, the British state constructed a large-scale network of more than 100 work camps, detention camps, torture centres and emergency villages throughout the country. The Kenya Human Rights Commission estimates that close to 70,000 people were detained at the peak of the emergency, with at least 160,000<sup>3</sup> people having passed through the network during the course of the war. The state of emergency, which lasted for close to 8 years was to become one of the bloodiest and longest wars of decolonisation fought within the British empire.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Mau Mau torture victims to receive compensation – Hague,' *BBC News*, 6 June 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-22790037>

Today very little is known about the presence of detention camps in Kenya or much less that they existed. This lack of public awareness can largely be attributed to three main reasons. The first, the removal of archives from Kenya in the period leading up to independence in 1963. The 1960s were a period that saw several African ex-colonies gain independence. During this transitional period, a secret programme by the British government known as *Operation Legacy* was put in place across the empire to destroy and remove 'sensitive' files in order to prevent them from being inherited by the newly independent states. For Kenya, this would have far-reaching consequences. The destruction and removal of documents pertaining to the emergency period would have a profound impact on how the founding story of the country would be crafted and in whose interests it would work. Secondly, the criminalization of the Mau Mau movement and suppression of oral history. Until 2005, Mau Mau remained classified as a terrorist organization in Kenya, greatly suppressing oral history transmission and community mobilization around the subject. Lastly, the destruction and repurposing of detention camp structures. After independence, most camps were either destroyed or repurposed into state prisons and secondary schools. Combining these factors and the inaccessibility of vital research sources now held in the UK, information on the camps has largely been wiped out of national memory in Kenya. Narratives surrounding this period remain hyper-localized, only alive within families or local communities.

MBC's approach to digitally visualising the history of detention seeks to counter the suppression of this history in Kenya and the immense difficulty in accessing archival resources. The team uses a form of investigative aesthetics that combines different historical sources such as oral history testimonies, archives and archaeology, to visualise detention camp structures and map their locations. This approach situates itself within a growing global practice in architecture, academia, art and cultural theory in which historical narratives and facts can be visualized through multiple modalities of knowledge. *Auschwitz VR*, a computer app that allows audiences to take a step back in time and 'view' the camp as it appeared during its existence, combines photos,



*A solitary cell/torture chamber from Mweru Works Camp, a detention camp that was located in Central Kenya. The camp was repurposed into a secondary school after Kenya gained independence in 1963. This building still stands within the school grounds.*

*Photograph courtesy: Chao Maina*

technical documentation and archival materials to create realistic 3D impressions of the camp. While in South Africa, interdisciplinary teams at the University of Pretoria used nearly 80 years of archaeological and ethnographic research data, together with oral histories and archives to digitally rebuild the ancient kingdom of Mapungubwe.<sup>4</sup>

Both tangible and intangible colonial histories are reconsidered through digital mediums. Digital visualisations are overlaid onto an interactive digital map showcasing the scale and spread across the country. The visualisations are populated with oral histories and first-person testimonies of those who experienced the camps. Using multiple historical sources to piece together a visual representation of history presents certain challenges, particularly around the representation of ambiguity, transparency and evidence. Yet ambiguity within the digital visualisa-

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<sup>4</sup> 'Rebuilding an ancient southern African kingdom,' *Innovate* 7, (2012), University of Pretoria, pp. 42–47.

tion process, just as in traditional research, is an inherent part of the process because of the subjective nature of gathering, selecting, and interpreting evidence. Therefore, the challenge is not so much in the ambiguity or lack of conclusive evidence but in how to communicate this with audiences in a transparent and evidential way.

An approach such as this embraces openness and vulnerability to communicate a visual historiography, in which ambiguity, uncertainty and speculation are inherent to the retelling and reclaiming of history based on memory and personal expression, providing alternative ways of coming to terms with the past by creating a space for discussion and embracing blind-spots in official narratives.

What does an initiative such as MBC tell us about the future of museums in Africa? It shows a growing need for audiences to actively participate in history and memory making. Not just as passive consumers but as active producers in their own history. It demonstrates a need for African audiences to reclaim agency over their history, where this very agency has previously been denied through colonial and neo-colonial systems. But most importantly it demonstrates that private collectives have the potential to influence historical practice in as much as public institutions do.

UNESCO's 2018 global report on the state of cultural policies states that to address challenges in uptake of technology within the cultural sector, a new type of relationship between the public sector, the private sector and civil society based on interactivity, collaboration and co-construction of policy frameworks has to emerge.<sup>5</sup> For museums in the global South which face significant challenges in skills, funding and infrastructure, an approach that prioritises partnerships with local and international partners could see African museums expand their digital reach significantly.

A good example of collaborative partnerships can be found in the *Reanimating Cultural Heritage* project, an initiative in Sierra Leone

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<sup>5</sup> *Reshaping Cultural Policies*, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2017.



*A digital reconstruction of the entrance and watchtower in Aguthi Works Camp, a detention camp that was located in central Kenya. The visualisation has been created based on archival photographs and present day evidence found at the site.*

to digitise the country's cultural collections and create an online platform where cultural objects at home and abroad could be reunited. The project which was funded by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council between 2009 and 2012 produced the digital heritage resource *sierraleoneheritage.org* which sought to raise awareness on the Sierra Leonean cultural materials dispersed in museum collections throughout the world. Partner museums included the British Museum, Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, Glasgow Museums, the World Museum Liverpool, the British Library's Sound Archive, and the Sierra Leone National Museum.<sup>6</sup>

Some of the central questions behind the project were: Can digital access to resources bridge the digital divide while facilitating knowledge exchange across economic, social, cultural and geographic bor-

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Basu, "Reanimating Cultural Heritage: Digital Curatorship, Knowledge Networks and Social Transformation in Sierra Leone." In: Coombes, Annie and Phillips, Ruth, (eds.), *International Handbooks of Museum Studies, Volume IV: Museum Transformations*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, pp. 337-364.

ders? Can inanimate museum objects gathering dust in museum stores, divorced from their cultural community contexts be reanimated in digital spaces by juxtaposing them with videos, images, oral testimonies and other forms of digital media? And can reanimating cultural objects help revive audience engagement with the Sierra Leone National Museum and the country's broader heritage sector in general?

Partner museums provided high quality digital images of Sierra Leonean objects within their collections along with metadata records associated with the object. The images from all partners along with their accompanying records were then compiled in the digital platform's database and totalled over 3500 objects by the time of the project's completion. In addition to displaying the images of the objects, each object page included a Facebook social plug-in which invited visitors to contribute and leave a comment about the object, information about it or to respond to other visitors' comments.

The project also involved face-to-face community outreach in both urban and rural areas, in addition to engaging teachers and both young and old members of the community with printed and online copies of cultural objects. Speaking on the impact of the community outreach, project leader Paul Basu remarked: "*Such initiatives demonstrate how a digital heritage project can act as a catalyst for a wider re-engagement with museums, regrounding the mediated space of the Internet at nodes of localized face-to-face interaction, including within the physical space of the museum itself.*"<sup>7</sup>

As efforts to reconstitute and campaign for the return of African cultural heritage gain in strength and numbers, the issue of digital repatriation has become a key part of the discussion amongst museums, scholars, public audiences and cultural practitioners across the board. At the heart of this discussion is the acknowledgement that digital media and digital platforms have become one of the primary ways in which we access and consume cultural content and they are therefore a crucial part of the restitution movement. The seminal 2018 Sarr and Savoy

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

report recommended the digitisation of African objects and records held in France. The report further recommended the creation of a single open access portal that would aggregate and collate digitised material held in multiple institutions across the country.<sup>8</sup>

In the recent past, key projects have emerged to explore the question of digital repatriation and how it can be used to not only provide access to cultural heritage but also as a catalyst to aid in the permanent return of African cultural objects. The *Digital Benin* project announced in 2020 seeks to bring together object data and related documentation material on Benin collections worldwide with the aim of creating a centralised and sustainable catalogue of Benin artworks and their history. The Women's History Museum of Zambia in 2020 announced that it would be collaborating with the Swedish Museum of Ethnography to create a digital platform that would host and make accessible Zambian objects currently held at the ethnography museum.

While the idea of open access platforms that make previously inaccessible content readily available sounds excellent on paper, there are still several questions around data ownership, community rights, unequal resources and uneven power relations that come into play. Scholars have warned that a one-size fits all approach towards digitisation will likely reinforce unequal power relations by placing European museums and governments in control of the generation and presentation of African cultural heritage data. Secondly, the decision to digitise cultural materials is not just a technical one; it is primarily a cultural and curatorial decision which should be made by the communities of origin who must enjoy full autonomy over access strategies and data rights. To avoid replicating neo-colonial systems and European custodianship over African cultural heritage, digitisation strategies and approaches must then be fully integrated within restitution frameworks and not treated as an afterthought.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Felwine Sarr, Benedicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage – Toward a New Relational Ethics*, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Dr Mathilde Pavis and Dr Andrea Wallace, RESPONSE TO THE 2018 SARR-SAVOY REPORT – Statement on Intellectual Property Rights and



Collaborative projects, such as [sierraleoneheritage.org](http://sierraleoneheritage.org), *Digital Benin* project and the Zambian digital cultural platform, which involve international collaboration between staff from different institutions with different skills sets and varying infrastructural contexts, more than likely require a capacity building component. Oftentimes training or supporting staff from African museums involves providing scholarships for staff to study abroad or offering staff placements/benchmarking opportunities in European museums. Although beneficial to some extent, experience has shown that this form of training and skills exchange is not the most effective because the infrastructural context and scale of resources of the institution in which the training takes place are greater than those available to the trainees. This makes it difficult to apply the skills learnt practically, as the training does not align with the trainees' work environments.

The question of digital skills for Africa's museum sector is therefore one that requires utmost priority. Strengthening digital skills suited to the contexts of African practitioners means designing curriculums suited to the needs of African museums and their audiences. For African museums to harness the potential of digital tools, we require a coordinated effort between African universities, technologists and cultural practitioners to design programs that critically engage participants with relevant questions around legacy, agency, audiences and digital futures. This can provide a path to positioning African museums as institutions that drive innovation by equipping both future and present-day museum professionals with the right tools to navigate digital worlds.

In Kenya, *Skills4Culture* an initiative by African Digital Heritage (ADH) sought to design digital heritage training programs for staff working in the country's museums and archives. The project, which ran from late 2018 to early 2020, involved carrying out a digital skills assessment of the cultural sector to establish what training programs would be developed based on practitioners' needs and contexts. The project was part of the global program, *Cultural Heritage for Inclu-*

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Open Access relevant to the digitization and restitution of African Cultural Heritage and associated materials, 2019.

*sive Growth*, funded by the British Council and implemented by local partners in Kenya, Columbia and Vietnam. The organisation (ADH) approached museums and archives across the country to assess their digital skills requirements and the challenges faced when implementing digital strategies within the institution.

Findings from the assessment revealed that the digital heritage space in Kenya is dominated by private digital curators on social media networks who regularly participate in the production and transmission of cultural content with little intervention, support and presence of the state. Although the private actors are not part of state institutions, this strategy of what might be called ‘crowd-sourced’ memory is becoming an important part of the widely popular online heritage space in Kenya. Being heavily reliant on new technologies to collect information, package it and disseminate it, these new actors bridge a gap between physical access to cultural content and an unprecedented digital appetite and accessibility to audiences.<sup>10</sup> Yet despite high levels of online engagement, a lack of collaboration between state and private actors means that digital engagement rarely translates to physical visits to museums and archives. The need for more private-public collaborative approaches therefore becomes a crucial part in determining how the cultural heritage sector grows, in which direction it moves and who it accommodates or shuts out.

Research also revealed that elements of state policy already prepared the ground for shifts in this direction. The National Museums of Kenya (NMK) is included in Kenya’s Vision 2030 Science, Technology and Innovation Working Group. In its internal assessment, NMK also highlighted certain challenges and shortcomings it faced when implementing technology. From an external perspective, the mention of these challenges highlighted the importance that NMK places on the role of technology as a key driver in cultural heritage, despite the challenges that still exist.

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<sup>10</sup> Chao Maina, *Skills Gaps in Kenya’s Cultural Heritage Industry*, submitted to British Council Cultural Heritage For Inclusive Growth Program, 2019.

Based on findings from the research, African Digital Heritage then developed digital training programs to address digital skills in four main areas of intervention: Documentation, Engagement, Presentation and Access. The programs were delivered in the form of short interactive two day workshops and topics included: Audiences of the future – Tailoring engaging online content, Using Digital to make the most of cultural assets, Creating interactive digital assets of cultural heritage material.

Over 230 people attended the training over the course of six months. Participants included museum and archive professionals and members of the public across a range of cultural venues. The training was highly valued by most, with digital skills gained including 3D visualization and expertise in the use of social media to build audiences. Participants requested further training on digitisation techniques and lessons relating to intellectual property and copyright. In addition to skills transfer, the workshops also sought to engage participants with questions around memory, audience participation and institutional culture. When looking at events in contemporary Kenyan history for instance, museum and archive staff were encouraged to design digital participation strategies that would allow public audiences to not just hear from the institution but contribute to discussions. This presented a significant deviation from current institutional practices which primarily used digital platforms to mostly share news about upcoming events and institutional updates with little to no interaction around historical collections or multi directional dialogue. Trainees expressed that with the right institutional underpinning and support from higher management, they would like to incorporate these strategies within their practice moving forward.

One of the main challenges experienced within the course of the training was a lack of sufficient technical infrastructure such as laptops, cameras and scanners to effectively support digitisation after the training was over. This still remains a huge hurdle that can only be breached with more access to state and/or private funding. The training also catered primarily to mid and entry-level staff who, despite being the



*Staff from the National Museums of Kenya, Kisumu receive training on photogrammetry, a 3D digitisation technique. Photograph courtesy: Chao Maina*

main beneficiaries, expressed that the decision on whether to incorporate skills learnt within institutional practice remained entirely in the hands of higher-level staff.

At the end of the project, African Digital Heritage recommended that further training should be developed to build on the promising outcomes from this programme in order to drive improvements in digitisation within the Kenyan cultural sector. It also recommended that future training should include high level management staff who would in turn be able to influence institutional policies and make a case for more digital infrastructure and human resource funding.<sup>11</sup>

The examples mentioned here are but a small representation of the work that has and is being done on the continent to fuse technology and African heritage. There remain many more initiatives whose suc-

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<sup>11</sup> Chao Maina (African Digital Heritage) and Victoria Tischler, *Final Report – Skills grant program, Kenya*, Cultural Heritage For Inclusive Growth, submitted to British Council, 2020.

cesses, lessons and failures continue to create new avenues for digital heritage interaction.

As we continue to define the agenda of the postcolonial African museum, shifts in curatorial practice must also take into account shifts in audience behaviour and shifts within the digital field. Which is not to say that the digital world is devoid of challenges; significant challenges such as infrastructure and lack of funding still exist. These challenges shouldn't however act as a deterrent to embracing technology, instead they should act as an incentive for innovation. At present, the African digital heritage space is dominated by private actors. A more concerted effort to facilitate more cross sectoral initiatives across private and public institutions could go a long way in circumnavigating current challenges around skills, funding and policy. One such effort is the *Open Restitution Africa Project*, a privately run initiative launched in 2020, which aims to work with African museums and interested communities, to develop and articulate restitution knowledge. *Open Restitution Africa Project* also aims to use various digital strategies to create a data platform that will collate, aggregate and mine information on restitution to support and enable African practitioners to make data informed decisions, thus bringing together several public and private partners across the museum sector and digital sector to create an Africa centred, Africa led approach to restitution.

Turned in a direction that expands the possibilities of collaboration, breaks down barriers of entry and legitimises new actors and perspectives, Africa's cultural heritage could grow into a decentralised, inclusive and economically productive sector, breaking free from the limits of present imagination and into a celebration of culture and heritage that is participatory, widely accessible and socially inclusive.

*Suzana Sousa*

## Homecoming: Restitution and the Postcolonial Museum.

The case of Dundo Museum in Angola and  
Foundation Sindika Dokolo

The Dundo Museum was created in the late 1930s after a collection of José Redinha, who became the first director of the museum, and was supported by the diamonds company Diamang. This moment coincided with a change in the Portuguese colonial policy<sup>1</sup> which targeted a more scientific knowledge of its colonies.<sup>2</sup> The scientific ethos of the museum was pursued through ethnographic expeditions and from 1946 through a series of academic exchanges with international museums, particularly promoted by the entomologist Barros Machado, with the Berlin Museum and Tervuren in Belgium.<sup>3</sup> Besides the effort to gather a great number of objects, Dundo Museum had also a live museum, The Native Village,<sup>4</sup> that housed artists whose production was in most part kept by the institution. Dundo museum was therefore a colonial

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<sup>1</sup> Established in Angola by José Mendes Ribeiro Norton de Matos (1912-1915) governor of the colony, during which period he set up a research program for a deeper scientific knowledge of the Angolan 'native'. For more information on this, see: Vuvu Fernando, Manzambi. 2010. "Diamang, museu e o conhecimento do 'Outro'. A pesquisa em duas épocas distintas no Museu do Dundo". In *Arte/Cokwe: a arte na sociedade Cokwe e nas comunidades circunvizinhas*. Luanda: Conferência internacional.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this, see: Vuvu Manzambi *op. cit.* and Collier, Delinda. 2016. *Repainting the Walls of Lunda: Information Colonialism and Angolan Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>3</sup> The role of Tervuren museum in framing the colonized other in the colonial context of Belgium is noteworthy. For more on this, see: Van Beurden, Sarah. 2015. *Authentically African: Arts and Transnational Politics of Congolese Culture*. Ohio: Ohio University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Porto, Nuno. "The Spectre of Art". *Etnográfica*, Vol VI (1), 2002, pp. 113-125.

endeavor and with stated concerns regarding the loss of authenticity of the works given the Western influence of researchers and the museum itself. The museum was part of the mining company Diamang that was also administratively responsible for the entire Lunda region, a state within a state.

From 1975, after independence, Dundo Museum was resignified as an Angolan museum and its collections records of an authentic culture now reframed as national. Its collections were also used to complement other museum collections in the country, in particular the National Anthropology Museum in Luanda. The museum was pivotal in the development of a concept of art applied to ancient and traditional Angolan material culture for its extensive collections but essentially due to the research it sponsored. The work of Marie-Louise Bastin and José Redinha is influential in the appropriation of the Cokwe aesthetic in the process of building the new nation. Bastin in particular produced a body of work that asserted the courtesan nature of Cokwe art through a deep analysis into its aesthetic value and the craftsmanship of the cultural artifacts. Nuno Porto underlines that “the court implied a more complex form of social organization; as such form was not contemporary, it endowed a historical depth on the Cokwe people.”<sup>5</sup> On the one hand this discourse has an immediate impact on the value of the works and on creating a market for Cokwe decorative art, on the other hand it consolidates the nationalist discourses of independence supporting its appropriation as national heritage.

#### DUNDO MUSEUM AND THE FOUNDATION SINDIKA DOKOLO

When in January 2019, Dundo Museum received from the Secretary of Culture<sup>6</sup> eight pieces that used to be part of their collections and were recuperated by the Foundation Sindika Dokolo in the world market

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 122.

<sup>6</sup> “Lunda Norte: Museu do Dundo recupera peças desaparecidas,” *Angop Agência Angola Press*, [http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt\\_pt/noticias/lazer-e-cul-](http://www.angop.ao/angola/pt_pt/noticias/lazer-e-cul-)

several questions arose. Should the museum reverberate the circulation of the objects? How should the objects be incorporated in the museum displays? Was this a restitution process? Foundation Sindika Dokolo and its recently perished patron promoted this project as a strategy to repatriate African artifacts and a way to promote African history. Shortly before his death through Instagram Sindika Dokolo claimed:

#GiveBackOurArt. We repatriate African art to museums in Africa. African art is our history, our identity, our dignity. My history didn't start in 1482, the 1st time a Portuguese explorer set eyes on a subject of the Kongo kingdom. I was there before, I was there all along.<sup>7</sup>

On these same lines the art patron presented the exhibition *Incarnations: African Art as Philosophy*,<sup>8</sup> at Bozar in Brussels, as a dialogue between the past and the present and an afrocentric view of history attempting to right wrongs.<sup>9</sup> Again questions arose: should we claim a new view on the objects and its relationship with audiences without questioning the museum as an institution? Is not the museum itself part of the narrative that defines the other? What does restitution mean? Dokolo raised an argument regarding history and how the narrative is one-sided, for instance, ignoring elements of the other by setting a historical time marked by the presence of the white man.<sup>10</sup> This argument is relevant because it reminds us that objects contain histories on themselves and how they are portrayed reinforces or challenges these histories. However, the meaning of restitution as stated by the foundation's project of acquiring objects in the market dismisses an important part of the restitution process, which is the recognition of malpractice.<sup>11</sup>

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tura/2019/0/2/Lunda-Norte-Museu-Dundo-recupera-pecas-desaparecidas,-9c7eefaf-878b-48aa-9fde-6651a045d78e.html

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.instagram.com/p/B3AOqXjnYrT/?hl=de>

<sup>8</sup> Exhibition created by the artist Kendell Geers with the collector Sindika Dokolo, it took place at BOZAR between 28 June 2019 and 06 October 2019.

<sup>9</sup> See YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkYzv9MwNO0>

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkYzv9MwNO0>

<sup>11</sup> According to Sarr and Savoy 2018 Report: The Restitution of African Cul-



The Congolese art collector Sindika Dokolo, one of the most notable contemporary art collectors in the continent, engaged with art from a point of view of heritage and legacy. In the 2007 African Pavilion at the Venice Biennale this was shown by the inclusion of artists such as Miquel Barceló and Basquiat in the exhibition. This is reinforced in his argument for the restitution of African works of art. However, the foundation process has been to locate the missing objects in the market and in private collections and either buy them or negotiate their return to the museum collection. The process has been independent of the government until the last phase of the return itself and consequent inclusion of the object in the museum collection. The fact that the Angolan government is a member of UNESCO has been irrelevant in the process. According to Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr in their 2018 report: “the act of restitution attempts to put things back in order, into proper harmony. To openly speak of restitutions is to speak of justice, or a re-balancing, recognition, of restoration and reparation, but above all: it’s a way to open a pathway toward establishing new cultural relations based on a newly reflected upon ethical relation.”<sup>12</sup> Although recognizing the value of the return of the objects to its community of origin, the process established by the Foundation Sindika Dokolo has a bitter taste as it overpowers the state and the existing legal procedures, granting a final authority to the market. The process also erases the role of justice, preventing therefore any kind of reparations or even the establishment of an ethical relation, since this must be based on the recognition of the roles of each part.

It is also relevant to note the absence of a discourse of the Angolan government regarding restitution. In the late 1970s the growing concern with objects being removed from the country after independence and also during the civil war was the reason for the approval of a set of

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tural Heritage. *Toward a New Relational Ethics: rape, pillaging, spoliation, ruse, forced consent, etc.*, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Sarr and Savoy 2018 Report: *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics.*

[http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr\\_savoy\\_en.pdf](http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf)

legal documents protecting national heritage;<sup>13</sup> in the following years several processes were filed with Interpol due to objects showing up in auctions. Nonetheless, a national restitution discourse would allow debates regarding the return of Angolan artifacts taken during colonialism but also stolen during the long civil war; at the same time it would challenge nation ideals supported by the maintenance of colonial definitions on art and the value of objects. The matter is quite complex as the post-independence pursuit of a national discourse was swift in adopting Bastin and Redinha's views on Angolan culture as description of a pre-colonial culture that should be promoted not taking into account concurrent narratives such as colonialism, market and art as a social construction.

### RESTITUTION AND MUSEUMS

Regrettably the debate on restitution is not accompanied by one on museums, except when the lack of such institutions in the African continent is underlined. However, this debate is relevant to help us define the museum of the future, an institution aware of its engagement with audiences and objects in an inclusive and self-critical way. On the other hand, looking at it from an African perspective it is worth to reconsider the role of objects in communities and how these should be represented in museums or not. In Angola such debates took place in the 1970s and culminated in the publication of the *Museology Manual*, a socialist instruction book on museums that aimed at giving ownership of museums back to the people. Influenced by the political discourse of the time the strategy ended up having no impact on policy or public access to museums. Some ideas are worth reconsideration such as a popular sense of ownership because this would set the tone for an inclusive museum and exclude the gaze over the other creating instead a practice of care and preservation.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The decree 80/76 for heritage protection.

<sup>14</sup> *Manual de Museologia*, Departamento Nacional de Museus e Monumentos. Luanda: Instituto Angolano do Livro, 1979.

Current discussions over this topic are taking place in ICOM and other platforms that look at more inclusive and community-based institutions:

Museums can be storehouses of knowledge, spaces we go in order to see ourselves represented, our histories retold, our present reflected, places we can go to help build our futures. In Ghana, Afahye or festivals, like the Homowo, Odwira, Hogbetsotso and the Damba, are where historically cultural knowledge is passed on, where people come together and exchange, and collective identities are forged. And yet none of this dynamism is apparent in the museums we have across the country. Instead our museums were built on imperial Western models.<sup>15</sup>

These words refer to the Mobile Museums project that consists of a structure that goes from village to village, from festival to festival, and together with communities and a team of researchers creates an archive of narratives about the communities and their objects that is displayed for everyone to enjoy and is then dismantled. This strategy assumes that the life of communities and objects play a role in allowing us to rethink both in the context of the museum. Where is home for these plundered and lost objects? What is the social place of objects? A recurrent issue with museums in Africa is that objects have lives within their communities. The mobile Museum project shows how a museum can be part of this life, giving back to the community the responsibility over objects and their narratives.

Dundo museum has kept itself as a colonial museum, preserving a gaze over the other and through the opacity of its bureaucracy a relationship of mistrust continues with its close community who questions the disappearance of certain objects.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.anoghana.org/mobile-museums>

<sup>16</sup> Interview with the director of the museum Ilunga André on May 06, 2020.

## HOME TO THE ANCESTORS?

The instance of returning home is always an event, usually a celebration marked by shared feelings of longing and a moment to share with loved ones lived experiences as well as an adaptation ritual in the sense that the new reality will be impacted by the time that passed. The collected objects at the colonial museum of Dundo were part of people's daily lives; it is this that gives sense to the native village and its effort to protect the authenticity of the colonized lives and bodies that were being transformed by the colonial experience; this much is admitted by Bastin and Redinha when they reference changes in technique. For me it also underlines that the social role of the objects might be changing as well. If so, how to consider restitution? Shouldn't the community be part of this process in order to take back these objects? Is restitution only an institutional, even bureaucratic process or entails historical repair and the restoration of social tissue? What is the social role of the museum in a post-trauma society?

The Dundo Museum and its looted and dispersed objects are a metaphor of sorts of the contemporary Angolan history. The institution navigated through traumatic events as an instrument and objectified its community. The post-independence state put this community in the realm of a political dispute over national identity taking advantage of an international market for its art while locally its artifacts were stolen, removed, displayed in a practice that mimicked the colonial procedures. The community representatives denounced the abusive use of their culture in 2006 when again their painted motifs were used out of context by the Luanda Triennial.<sup>17</sup> Fourteen years past the event the opportunity was there to discuss national identity and material culture as well as the harm caused by the colonial gaze and appropriation of the other's culture.

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<sup>17</sup> For more on this, see: Delinda Collier, "Accessing the Ancestors: The Re-Mediation of José Redinha's *Paredes Pintadas da Lunda*". *Critical Interventions* 9/10, Spring 2012, pp. 122-142.

The artifacts that found their way home through the Foundation Sindika Dokolo are still removed from their communities making us wonder how restitution should be a multifaceted process that engages history and national narratives while necessarily repairs the violence that culminated in the removal of these artifacts.

*Flower Manase*

# Museum of the Future: The Case of the National Museum of Tanzania

## INTRODUCTION

The museum of the future, as a terminology, had gained popularity at the end of the 19th century to the early 20th century when museums in Europe and the United States adopted changes brought by the massive socio-political and economic development of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century. The Smithsonian Institution report of 1888-1889 illustrated a transformation that appeared compelling to the idea of 16th century museums and again in the 19th and 20th century, for them to evolve into increasingly academic institutions – museums of the future then – in order to enlighten people of ongoing changes<sup>1</sup> (Brown 1891). The colonial expansion to Africa was, due to many factors, an industrial revolution, that accompanied the formation of museums in the new colonial territories. In adapting to the motto “*The museum of the past, must be set aside, reconstructed, transformed into the living thought, the museum of the future must stand side by side with the library and laboratory as part of the teaching equipment of the college and university, and in the great cities co-operate with the public library as one of the principal agencies for enlightenment of the people,*”<sup>2</sup> the museum of the future was referred to as a place for enlightenment. The

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<sup>1</sup> “*The museum of the past, must be set aside, reconstructed, transformed from the cemetery of bric-a-brac into a nursery of living thoughts. The museum of the future must stand side by side with the library and laboratory, as part of the teaching equipment of the college and university, and in the great cities co-operate with the public library as one of the principal agencies for the enlightenment of the people*” by the Museum of the Future, Smithsonian Institution, From the report of the National Museum 1888-89 (pp. 427-445), United States National Museum, Washington.

<sup>2</sup> Museum of the Future, Smithsonian Institution, From the report of the



*Figure 1: King George V Memorial Museum, the museum was opened to public in 1940. Photo credit: Edgar Chatanda, 2019*

majority of the museums established in Africa during the colonial era (1885-1960s) followed the same pattern, as they were solely serving as repositories of knowledge for colonisers (the upper class) to learn about the historical and cultural background of the colonised societies.

In Tanzania, this is the case with the first museum established in 1940 (the King George V Memorial Museum) by the British colonial administration.<sup>3</sup> The collection of the King George V Memorial Museum includes objects of ethnography, history, geology, geography, forestry and natural history. The museum's acquisition of objects and collections started in 1934 under the directives of Governor Sir Harold McMichael, as he aimed for a representation of the country's resources

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National Museum 1888-89 (pp. 427-445), United States National Museum, Washington.

<sup>3</sup> In 1913 the German colonial government had planned for the National Exhibition (in August 1914) and opening of the museum in German East Africa, however this idea was short lived due to the outbreak of the First World War (WWI), Msemwa (2005).

and activities. On the other hand, the idea of having a museum was parallel to the construction of a public scientific library, as the museum was expected to “*serve as a solid foundation and common meeting ground for such cultural, scientific or art societies already exist or gradually develop in territory.*” (Meyer-Heiselberg 1972, 7) The collection as well as documentation and interpretation pronouncements of the museum collections were left to one British curator and only a few Africans were employed or volunteered as technicians and security guards. (Meyer-Heiselberg 1972, 8) From the regular museum operations, one could identify that the central ideology of developing the museum in Tanganyika territory was to serve academic requirements. The museum thus turned out to be an academic resource centre through its exhibitions, archives, periodicals and libraries, as museums were in Europe. The museum’s frequent users were the minority European population and visitors to Tanganyika, as well as a minimal number of African scholars and workers serving as clerks to colonial offices. Parallely, the museum was designed knowingly to attract the visual impressions of the locals who had never visited it before. In this perspective, the King George V Memorial Museum was not connected to surrounding communities and overall Tanganyika’s societies, but rather performed as a colonial institution under the British colonial regime.

Following the independence of Tanganyika in 1961, the museum had to reinvent itself administratively and operationally to foster the newly independent country’s ideologies of nation-building and national identity. (Minogape 2018) The political atmosphere from the 1960s to 1990s attracted open public debates and discussions to define the direction of the new Tanganyika, and to reinterpret the country’s economic, political, social and cultural perspectives. At this time in history, the National Museum was tasked to use culture as a catalyst for change. It had to work on the interpretation of museum objects to fit into the Africanization agenda. The museum exhibitions and collections were diversified to promote unity, a sense of independence, nationalism and patriotism. Collections and exhibitions started to include the history of the independence struggle in Tanganyika and the contribution of Tanzania and Mwalimu Julius J.K Nyerere to the Southern African



liberation movements (Namibia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and South Africa).

At the same time, the National Museum used the political and economic shift to widen the debates, discussion and education by reaching more communities out of the city. The first established and traveling museum exhibition in 1968 and the open-air Village Museum, conceptualised in 1964 and inaugurated in 1967, were ways of nurturing African culture in the city and providing a window for cultural reflection and the learning of about more than 120 ethnic groups in Tanzania. In commemoration of the country's ethnic diversity, the National Museum through the Village Museum started the national Ethnic Day in 1994. The institution further reckoned with interactive programmes at the Museum and House of Culture in 2005 (Minogape 2018) as a way of reinventing itself. The exhibitions, festivals, artistic performances and programmes facilitated dialogues and discussions on various topics including colonial history. For instance, the museum started the annual Maji Maji Cultural Tourism Festival (Maji Maji Festival) in 2010 as a national event hosted in the area where Maji Maji resistance occurred in the Songea-Ruvuma region. The Maji Maji Festival, every February, is attended by descendants of the ethnic groups involved in the Maji Maji resistance; mainly the Ngoni ethnic group from Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique. The one-week-long event consists of daily museum programmes including academic workshops and seminars for cultural practitioners and universities, museum primary and secondary school outreaches, and public programmes in open spaces like markets and streets. The Maji Maji Festival is funded by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism, and is supported by the Ruvuma regional government, local government, the Ngoni council of elders and general public. During the last day of commemorations – the peak – Ngoni elders normally practice rituals in remembrance of the African warriors and Chiefs who lost their lives during the German colonial period, and in honour of their contribution to the independence and freedom of Tanzania. Hence for many years, the Maji Maji Festival was part of the museum's efforts to have the public engage in museum activities through a remembering of the colonial past. These engagements

on sensitive topics like colonialism have created a forum for the public, especially community elders, to enter discussions with the youth and sometimes use traditional songs and performances to convey their messages. The festival is successful as it draws cultural practitioners, museums, schools, the government and different ethnicities separated by colonial boundaries (after the Berlin Conference of 1884/1885) now located in other countries like Malawi and Mozambique. Therefore, the reunion becomes part of a healing therapy that also enables social and cultural networking.

In the past, colonial history remained regarded as part of African dark history that links colonised countries socially, economically and politically with the former colonising states. However, such colonial history was never openly discussed among colonisers and the colonised publics until recent years; and now the topic is no longer a hidden case. The subject of colonialism and its narratives are being challenged globally to transform the topic and have it better suited to current realities and needs. For instance, 21st century 'millennials' in Europe, America, Oceania, Asia and Africa are challenging global colonial structures in museum contexts, demanding museums to transform and decolonise within and respond to societal shifts and contemporary community trials like racism (Umolu 2020). There have been multiple worldwide activist movements demanding the need for change, including social media activism (Twitter) and marching protestors in the United States, Germany, UK and France, who joined the movement for transforming and decolonising government institutions, while deploring the ways black people are currently treated, which stems from the time of colonialism. Examples include the Black Lives Matter movement, (Umolu 2020) and the Rhodes Must Fall movement through universities in South Africa and United Kingdom (Chaudhuri 2016). These movements demand a societal change of perspectives towards Africans and the decolonisation of institutional structures that are still used as a tool for the oppression of Black/Coloured/Asian communities and cultures. The police, legal systems, museums, academic institutions and other related government entities are pressured to reform. These movements indicate that the political independence of colonised states is not

enough to dismantle long existing colonial structures within “independent” states and their institutions and to create the needed revolutions of equality against racialism. External and internal pressures are forcing colonial establishments that are now government institutions such as national museums to rethink their structures, hierarchies and collections, and invest more in the culture of collaboration, transparency and mutual understanding (Laely 2018: Umolu 2020). This has been the case with the National Museum of Tanzania since the year 2000, throughout the journey of transforming the King George V Memorial Museum to the Museum and House of Culture (Msemwa 2005).

#### TRANSFORMING THE KING GEORGE V MEMORIAL MUSEUM TO THE MUSEUM AND HOUSE OF CULTURE IN DAR ES SALAAM (2000- 2011)

For about eleven years since 2000, the National Museum of Tanzania has been functioning to transform herself and meet community demands following the results of a study carried out in the year of 2000 on national museum visitors (Msemwa 2005). The study was a turning point for the museum’s initial process of change, as findings revealed that less Tanzanians were visiting the museum. The majority of the reasons for this were connected to the colonial framework of the museum to which the Dar es Salaam community felt somehow disconnected. The museum appeared to be a place for dead cultures (through the practice of keeping old things), unchanged exhibits (permanent exhibitions remained unchanged for more than 10 years) and other irrelevant museum exhibitions. Programmes lacked connections to living cultures, and the use of technical languages and academic jargon in producing exhibits and a lack of ownership meant the surrounding community were less engaged as museum stakeholders (Msemwa 2005). However, these challenges were attributed to the low budget and underfunding of museum functions and operations. In response to the study’s findings, the management of the National Museum of Tanzania identified the misconception of the museum role and its functions as the main



*Figure 2: Students from Dar es Salaam primary schools watching a performance at the new Museum and House of Culture theatre. Photo credit: Sixmund Bageshe, 2019*

reason behind the underutilization of the museum by the surrounding community.

The proposal to transform the museum into a popular platform for dialogue was then developed (Msemwa 2005), and had a participatory approach by involving the community as stakeholders in the making of the House of Culture project (Msemwa 2005). In 2003 during the process of brainstorming the museum's transformation, involved Tanzanian artists came up with a relevant poem to stir dialogue and debates outside of the museum. The poem was about the changes needed in the museum at the time. Ms. Sauda Kilumanga's poem (written in 2003) was regarded as a community outcry, as it read:

“The museum is tired and old,  
The public is bored, we are told  
So what do we do to wake up the giant?  
How do we coax and lure our clients?

We scratched our heads and wondered much  
And paced the floor to try to touch  
What it is exactly we need?  
What we must do in order to succeed

We must call in the children and let them do art  
Let them rejoice in their creations and make them feel smart  
We must tell those with special needs “Karibu”, come in  
For theirs is a world that is easy to fence in  
The youth must find solace, inspirations and more....  
When they come off the streets and walk through our door  
SO LET US BRAINSTORM ON HOW” (Msemwa 2005)

Following the stakeholders’ community dialogues, the museum’s management learned how the public was yearning for a vibrant museum that is interesting to children, youths, artists, disadvantaged and marginalized groups (Msemwa 2005). Majority of the public sought a museum with facilities, activities and programmes that were centred on community values, standards, ethics and contemporary requirements. The educational role of the museum was proposed to be ‘metamorphosed’ from colonial patterns and formalities to fit into the informal education system. The museum was to offer education programmes using formats such as oral traditions, storytelling through elders, traditional dances, poems, artistic works and other interventions, while also employing interactive programmes as part of recreation, and using ethnographic collections to reinvent the past lifestyle and histories to teach youth and children about their cultural heritage. The tailored education programmes for school-going children and university youth were proposed to be more interactive to portray the authenticity of the past societal culture and its existence.

In transforming the National Museum of Tanzania to attract the public, many efforts were directed towards changing the museum architecture for it to be unlike the King George V Memorial Museum, which



*Figure 3: A monthly University performance named 'Tshirt na Jeans' at the Museum and House of Culture theatre. Photo credit: Edgar Chatanda, 2016*

had only two permanent exhibition galleries, a small periodical room, library, conference chamber and the director's office. The new Museum and House of Culture's architectural model was enlarged to include enough spaces for the museum staff, four permanent exhibition galleries, one temporary gallery, two libraries with storytelling chambers (one for children and another for university students), theatre, recording studio, conference room, board rooms, multimedia room, laboratories, meeting rooms and restaurant. These facilities were designed to attract and accommodate more Tanzanian visitors, while promoting Tanzanian culture and nurturing cultural mediation among Tanzanian ethnic groups and foreign cultures.

The Museum and House of Culture facilities such as the theatre serves both local and international artists for cultural and artistic performances, as well as schools and university programmes. Since 2015, the museum has maintained a monthly programme titled 'The Museum Art Explosion' that aims to work with local artists and use art and socio-political topics to attract communities to the museum. The programme has included themes such as the 2017/2018 "Museum Art Explosion against corruption" that created cartoons, paintings and



*Figure 4: An artists' group named Majuto theatre group performing during the Museum Art Explosion, a monthly program organised by the Museum and House of Culture (the organisers of this program are the museum and the committee of Tanzanian artists), Photo credit: Sixmund Bageshe, 2018*

performances to communicate the message of anti-corruption. The Embassy of Switzerland was the main source of funding for this programme.

Art performances and mobile exhibitions are designed to be taken out of Dar es Salaam into regions including Morogoro, Arusha, Kilimanjaro, Tanga and Ruvuma. The second phase of the programme was launched in 2018 and raised awareness of social ills including adolescent pregnancies and promoted education among girls and young women. It was taken to affected regions such as Shinyanga and Tabora. In 2019-2020, the Museum Art Explosion joined the environmental programmes movement to raise awareness of maintaining a clean environment and of recycling. The project titled “My trash, My treasure” or “taka dili” was a way of encouraging people to sort and recycle waste. Participating artists used plastic bags, scrap metals, plastic and

glass bottles and other wastes to create artworks. The programme further aimed at educating the public about the economics of recycling waste as a part of managing the environment. This programme was mainly taken to affected cities and urban areas like Dar es Salaam, Mbeya and Dodoma. In early 2020, the programme was unable to continue following the COVID-19 Pandemic restrictions. The museum had plans to re-launch the programme in November 2020 after elections in Tanzania. The anticipated topic was “Life after Election” and the idea was to use art to bring people together after the time of political campaigns and elections, while also marking the official re-opening of the Museum and House of Culture facilities to the public.

Through the Museum Art Explosion programme, the museum has managed to use contemporary issues and communal challenges to interact with a diverse set of entities including NGOs, the private sector, embassies, artists, government and local and foreign visitors. The museum has gained community feedback through the programme and achieved an increase in the number of visitors, while also reaching out to communities in the regions through mobile art exhibitions. However, operating the Museum Art Explosion programme in the years to come requires financial capacity and sustainable sources of funding. The challenge of mobilizing funds to maintain a programme that has brought local artists and communities together since 2015 is of great concern.

#### THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF TANZANIA AND THE IDEA OF THE MUSEUM OF THE FUTURE

The discussion under this section comes from the question: Is the National Museum of Tanzania prepared to be a museum of the future in the 21st century? Promptly and reflecting over the past years of the National Museum of Tanzania, it is obvious that the national museum started its transformation journey shortly after the independence of Tanganyika. The National Museum of Tanzania, as a government institution, had aligned herself with the Africanization (localization) policy of the 1960s under the leadership of the first Prime Minister and



President Mwalimu J.K Nyerere. The Africanization policy aimed to address the discrimination of Africans and other marginalized races in the Tanganyika civil services sectors during the colonial times. Hence, the motive of independence was to ensure equality and guarantee that government sectors including the museum and other institutions be localized (Mwalimu J.K Nyerere: 1966). During the 1970s, the museum was led by the first African curator, Dr. Fidelis Masao, who was later appointed by the President as the first Tanzanian director of the National Museum of Tanzania as per Section 5(1) of the National Museum of Tanzania Act No. 7(United Republic of Tanzania, 1980). The first African director, museum board, board of trustees and the minister responsible in the government administration had to engage on the museum perspectives and ideologies present at the time, for the institution to fit into the new social, economic, political and cultural directives (United Republic of Tanzania, 1980). The museum had to begin operating and customizing her services in line with the needs of locals, contrary to its operations during the colonial times.

The museum administration started to operate according to the newly established national standards communicated through policies and regulations. The Museum Act number 23 of 1963 replaced the colonial Museum Ordinance number 40 of 1941, in which the new Museum Act of 1963 had transferred management of the King George V Memorial Museum properties to the board of trustees of the National Museum of Tanganyika (Minogape: 2018).

The museum's institutional management and operational policies were thus aligned with the 1960s national policy of Africanization and its internal organizational structure was further advanced to include the hiring of African locals in various positions. Considering the lack of skilled and educated personnel, the museum board had to develop strategies for the internal training of the newly recruited African museum staff and sponsor career development in museology and archaeology degrees abroad. On the operational side, the perspectives of museum research and exhibitions, especially on ethnographic and related cultural materials, shifted the dimensions from a secretive investigation

and anthropological nature (Euro-style) to more of a documentation, cultural orientation, interaction and openness (Afro-style) approach that aimed to promote the safeguarding and preservation of cultural materials and identities within their localities and among ethnicities. Throughout the museum outreaches to communities (1960s-2000s), the institution had to design and introduce community programmes aimed at gaining more community trust and fostering an understanding of the museum and its functions. This was done through various media formats including radio programmes and mobile exhibitions that travelled through the regions.

The political shift brought by the national Africanization policy of the 1960s contributed to the initial transformation of the museum, which was supported by the museum's board of trustees who consented to the institutional ten-year development plan and its implementation until the 1970s. The new museum development plan after independence was structured and geared in the direction of building a new image of the museum as a requisite tool for developing and shaping the national identity. The idea of national Africanization was also adopted in the museum's organizational structure and the board of trustees was separated from the management committee as a way of reforming and ensuring the efficiency of the management structure (Minogape 2018). On other end, the museum's legal reforms (Museum Act of 1963, Museum Act of 1965 and Museum Act of 1980) opened ministerial dialogues on the roles of the National Museum and drew a thin line of separation between the museum and the Antiquity Department's roles and functions. During these legal reforms, the National Museum started to invest in new projects by opening museums in regions such as the Mwalimu Nyerere Museum Centre in the Musoma region, the Natural History Museum in the Arusha region, and the Maji Maji Memorial Museum and Kawawa Museum in the Ruvuma region. From the 1960s to 2020, the National Museum has established about seven branches countrywide and also provides consultancy services to other institutions, regional offices, local government offices, individuals or members of the private sector (NGOs) interested in developing and running their own museums.

The National Museum of Tanzania played a significant socio-political, economic and cultural role to address and raise awareness on the national agendas of the new independent state. Exhibitions addressed matters including health, adult education, freedom, unity and combating ignorance through raising awareness and promoting education for all (Nyerere 1966). The national museum had to transform her vision and mission, which emanated from colonial perceptions into the new ideologies of an independent state that prioritized its services to Africans and surrounding communities. For instance, on 29th January 1967, the Arusha Declaration was conceded and adopted, which meant Tanzania was committed to socialism with an emphasis on self-reliance and Ujamaa (unity) in pursuing the country's development. In 1977, the Arusha Declaration Museum was opened to the public under the National Museum of Tanzania in the Arusha region. The museum played a significant role in educating the communities and Tanzanians on the Arusha Declaration, while interpreting the key principles and showcasing the country's political history.

Apart from political directives, policies and legal regulations, the museum's transformation has been engineered with a strategic plan, annual budget priorities and action plans. The National Museum of Tanzania's five-year strategic plan, budget and action plan (2012-2016 and 2018-2022) appear to emphasize the goals of increasing the internal revenue by 10% and improving the museum facilities and services as part of intensifying stakeholders' involvement into the core functions of the institution (National Museum of Tanzania Strategic Plan 2016; 2022). However, such efforts are hindered by several challenges, including the absence of a marketing strategy and prescribed approaches on the cultural development and public engagement. According to the Director General of the National Museum of Tanzania, Dr. Noel Lwoga, the National Museum (2020-2025) future plans are to ensure that cultural heritage values are widely promoted in and outside of Tanzania. The aim is to increase internal revenues by 60% and attain sustainable museum operations and services, while contributing to the country's economic, political, social and cultural development (Lwoga 2020).

For the National Museum of Tanzania to achieve global recognition, further concerns should be addressed. The museum should first consider following the global pattern of transformation that calls for museums to focus on decolonisation, provenance research and restitution subjects. Therefore, the National Museum of Tanzania should:

- review her policies, regulations and laws that were fashioned or amended soon after independence in the 1960s. The national museum requires an update to the institutional structure, policies, regulations and legal framework in support of contemporary and global affairs that advocate for dismantling the neo-colonial legacy, racism, ongoing discriminations in public spaces and the restoration of national pride of the formerly colonised states through pursuing the restitution of national trophies and cultural heritages (prioritizing human remains) taken from the country during colonialism.
- empower local communities and non-governmental regional museums to safeguard the collective cultural heritages and collections in an innovative style that matches with technological inventions such as the use of a digital database and virtual exhibitions. (Weber-Sinn and Ivanov 2020)
- re-interpret her museum collections and information gathered during German and British colonialism that were categorized out of racial and ethnic prejudices to create hierarchies and asymmetries in museum narrated histories (Abiti 2018)
- review colonial methodologies of collecting and the style of mounting the exhibitions, as for a long time national museums in Africa had followed the colonial methodologies of collecting among ethnicities. The mounting of exhibitions were in comparative flamboyance, as cultures of certain tribes or ethnicities were contested against other tribes/ethnicities ( Davison 2005). The comparative dogma has colonial roots, as in some societies/ethnicities/regions it created classes and supremacy of one culture against the other. Hence, this instigates post-colonial traumas and occasionally fuels

political dynamics causing civil wars or ethnic wars (farmer versus pastoralist disputes). The national museum could be a forum for mediation through public debate, discussions and engagement to create harmony and instigate tolerance and a mutual understanding among communities ( Black 2005)

- conduct the provenance research of her collections acquired and inherited from the colonial background ( Reyels et. al 2018)
- re-think the museum’s operational technique and organizational structures that are currently reactive, for them to fit into the global museology of the 21st century that stays relevant and responsive to social and environmental issues – including addressing climate change, social justice and indigenous rights (Kelly 2006)
- contemplate, strategize/plan, budget and initiate implementation of her plans of returning the colonial cultural heritage currently stored at museums of the former colonizing states, such as Germany and Britain. These collections should be restituted, reconnected to the communities of origin and used to add economic value through cultural tourism in communities of origin (Reyels et. al 2018; Weber-Sinn and Ivanov 2020)

## CONCLUSION

The National Museum of Tanzania’s transformation is linked to social, cultural and political ideologies originating from African socialism through the Africanization national policy of the 1960s. However, some of the transformations are credited to the Museum and House of Culture project (2005-2011) and associated programs such as the Museum Art Explosion programme (2015-2019). In general, the museum managed to interact with surrounding communities through addressing societal challenges such as corruption, adolescent pregnancies, waste management and other social ills. The museum’s image was transformed by the inclusion of local artists from the communities. Success of the museum’s transformation is however challenged by the lack of economic capacities and funding concerns, which have also hin-

dered the institution's efforts of tapping into the potential economic benefits of the cultural sector – specifically cultural tourism – in order to increase her revenues. Since the museum is not a competitive tourist attraction – compared to national parks and other natural tourism attractions – the museum has lagged behind in marketing and selling her products, including exhibitions of historical value, to tourists. The museum entrance fee is relatively low, to the extent of not becoming a reliable source of revenue to cover even the operational costs of the building facilities, programmes and personnel. This has made the institution dependant on government subventions, which are also minimal compared to the museum's annual budget. Unlike the 16th-20th century museum perspectives, the museum of the future in the 21st century should be self-reliant, self-operating and self-financing to ensure neutrality among the public, government, political parties, private sector and communities; thereby winning the public's trust to hold debates and engage on social, economic, political and cultural discussions (Kelly 2016). Therefore, the National Museum of Tanzania is expected to rethink modalities for capturing the economic potential of the cultural tourism sector in Tanzania and has a lot to learn from the natural tourism industry – national parks, forests and game reserves – which has managed to safeguard the natural resources, while tapping the economic potential and increasing the number of international and national tourist's visits and revenues. The National Museum of Tanzania should position herself as a competitive touristic institution by tapping the economic potential of cultural resources, while prioritizing the safeguarding of collections and other core museum functions through the collected revenues. Government subsidies and international project grants would not be the only sources of revenue that the national museum depends on for running her operations. The cultural tourism sector and museum as a self-sustainable institution would grow to attract visitors at local and international level if the museum invests in her facilities, updates her products and frequently rebrands her services with new and interesting ideas to the public by improving the quality of exhibitions and employing technology through more virtual exhibition

materials online. Digital exhibitions and making collections accessible remotely would allow the museum to open a window to the world.

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Goodman Gwasira

## Re-Presenting Ethnicity in the Owela Museum, Windhoek, Namibia

The Owela Museum in Windhoek, Namibia, is a miniature representation of the colonial order and colonial processes that Namibia went through. The museum was reserved for displays of animals and indigenous ethnic groups using the dioramic technique. After the independence of Namibia in 1990 there were some efforts to repackage the Owela Museum as a museum of Namibian cultures. New displays that focused on ethnic groups were developed with the active participation of the respective indigenous communities. This essay takes the new wing in the Owela Museum that displays ‘cultures of Namibia’ to engage with issues of decolonising museum methodologies in a post-colonial context. Specifically this essay interrogates the revised San exhibition and demonstrates how an inclusive and participatory museum practice can achieve the goal of redefining museums as spaces of self-identity construction that comes from within the communities. Such museums are usually settings where knowledge production and skills transfer take place, as opposed to the outdated concept of a museum as a collection and display of objects. I further discuss some of the challenges of decolonising museums especially in the aftermath of deep and multiple colonialisms.

The museum in Namibia has a troubled and difficult history that is entangled with imperialism and colonialism. The idea of a museum was predicated on racial classification and the political economy of colonialism. It was an institution that assembled knowledge about the land and the country’s resources, which included its black inhabitants. This was reflected in the configuration of cultural history displays and the ethnographic displays, which were in separate locations in Windhoek.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> E. Schildkrout, ‘Museums and Nationalism in Namibia’, *Museum Anthropology*, 19, 2, (1995), pp. 65-77.

The separation of ethnography from cultural history was a common practice in 19th and 20th century South African museums. Therefore the separation of cultural history from ethnography was an act of South Africanisation of the museum of Namibia which itself was a product of colonisation. The separation was premised on the understanding that ethnography was a practice of classifying and comparing different races. However, in museum practice it had an ideological consequence of justifying racism, colonialism and social inequality. On another level ‘ethnographising’ indigenous heritage and separating it from colonial heritage, functioned as a form of governmentality.<sup>2</sup>

The cultural history displays were located in the old German fort, the *Alte Feste from 1962*.<sup>3</sup> These comprised settler and colonial history. There were no displays of indigenous cultures and natural history in the *Alte Feste*. There was a physical separation of ethnology, geology and archaeology from the museum collection long before the establishment of the *Alte Feste* as a display centre for colonial history.<sup>4</sup> However, this changed when a display about independence was installed in 1990. It focused on the liberation struggle and laid more emphasis on the first democratic election process. Later the independence display was translocated to the new Independence Memorial Museum that was constructed adjacent to the *Alte Feste* and inaugurated in 2014. Attempts were also made to add narratives about indigenous history and culture after independence to the *Alte Feste*, notably through a display on Nama culture and a permanent exhibition on prehistoric rock art. The *Alte Feste* was eventually closed to the public due to the structural instability of the building.

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion on how the museum developed as an institution of controlling people see T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics*, (London: Routledge, 1995). See also C. Rassool, ‘Re-storing the Skeletons of Empire: Return, Reburial and Rehumanisation in Southern Africa’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 41, 30, (2015), p. 655.

<sup>3</sup> A. Otto-Reiner, *From Landesmuseum to National Museum of Namibia: 100 years (1907 -2007) A Chronology of an African Museum*, (Windhoek: National Museum of Namibia, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> A. Otto-Reiner, *Ibid*.

The Owela museum, like others in southern Africa, displayed indigenous cultures and life-casts of indigenous people in the same gallery as animals and flora, while European heritage was displayed in ‘cultural history’ museums, such as the *Alte Feste*. This was a common practice in line with the Darwinian approach that emphasized social inequality.<sup>5</sup> The old museum model created uncomfortable categories of race, ethnicity and identity using what I call ‘museopoetic licence’. I use the term ‘museopoetic licence’ to refer to a practice whereby museum curators deviate from facts in order to achieve specific preconceived results in an exhibition.

The Owela Museum epitomized the ethnographic museum in Namibia. It reflected an approach that was found in several museums around the country. The Owela museum was used to entrench theories and policies of segregation and separate development such as the Odendaal plan. The Odendaal Commission of 1962 had, as one of its recommendations, the philosophy that ‘development should be based on the ethnic division of Namibian society.’<sup>6</sup> The dioramas in Owela were designed to support the ‘ethnicisation’ of Namibian society. The exhibition was known as “Man [sic] in His Environment”. It displayed wax statues of indigenous people of Namibia in settings that were associated with their daily economic activities. Objects displayed in these dioramas included implements and clothing that served as ‘markers’ that distinguished specific ethnic groups from each other. The wax statues were placed in the foreground of the supposedly ‘typical’ ecological backdrop of the geographical location where the specific ethnic groups were found.

The Owela Museum might be considered as an institution of indoctrination that reproduced the South African vision of ‘Grand Apartheid’ based on ethnic homelands that was exported to Namibia. One of the displays that caused a lot of discomfort to museum visitors after

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<sup>5</sup> P. Davison, ‘Rethinking the practice of ethnography and cultural history in South African Museums’, *African Studies*, 49, 1, (1990), pp. 149-167.

<sup>6</sup> C.B. Botha, ‘The Odendaal Plan: ‘Development’ for colonial Namibia’. Available at <https://www.namibweb.com/oden.htm> retrieved 20 July 2020.

independence was the contentious 'Boesmandeorama', which included life-casts of the San people. The set of casts, which are referred to in the exhibition as 'masks' were viewed as works of art done by Hans Lichtenecker.<sup>7</sup> The other set which consisted of full body life-casts of the San people on display were, according to the exhibition captions, made by the museum taxidermist P. Buys. The art of making life-casts was popularised in southern Africa by a taxidermist who worked for the South African Museum, James Drury. He also cast some San people of Namibia.<sup>8</sup> Rassool contended that the production of life-casts, which became a common practice in southern Africa in the 1970s and the associated loot of human remains was framed as an effort to preserve the physical characteristics of a 'disappearing' race.<sup>9</sup>

Many reviews on the internet demonstrated that visitors were impressed by the artistic skill with which the life casts were made. However, the context and manner in which these casts were made rendered them problematic in the postcolonial discourse in Namibia. In the process of casting, some human hair were collected from the San people and were used to reconstruct a realistic resemblance of the subjects of the casting. In addition to human hair, clothes and accessories that the people who were cast were wearing were also collected and used to dress the life-casts.<sup>10</sup>

It became imperative for the National Museum of Namibia to confront the colonial legacy of the ethnographic gallery in the new displays. In addition the museum had to interrogate the approach of classifying

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<sup>7</sup> A. Hoffmann, (ed.), *What we see: Reconsidering an Anthropometrical Collection from Southern Africa: Images, Voices and Versioning*, Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> E. du Pisani, 'James Drury: Man who made the Bushman figures', *National Museum News*, (1980), pp. 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> C. Rassool, 'Re-storing the Skeletons of Empire: Return, Reburial and Rehumanisation in Southern Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 41, 30, (2015), p. 654.

<sup>10</sup> The captions in the new San display refer to the hair and objects being obtained by the Museum technician so that they could be used to make the dioramas look authentic.



*A life-cast of a San woman translocated from the diorama to the new exhibition. Image: Courtesy of the National Museum of Namibia*

European heritage as ‘history’ and superior while classifying African heritage as ‘static’, primeval and lower than European heritage.

Towards efforts to make the display less offensive, one of the ideas suggested was to make them more comprehensive by adding information and making them interactive. Touch screens could include information that had been omitted such as the migration of communities in pre-colonial times.<sup>11</sup> However this was not implemented. At one point an internal committee that evaluated the exhibitions suggested dismantling the exhibition entirely for it was viewed as politically unsound in an independent nation.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> L. Chiang, L. Clark, and J. Pizzimenti, ‘Enhancing Visitor Experience at the Owela Display Centre through Interactive Media’. Available at [https://web.wpi.edu/Pubs/E-project/Available/E-project-050910-155755/unrestricted/Owela\\_Paper.pdf](https://web.wpi.edu/Pubs/E-project/Available/E-project-050910-155755/unrestricted/Owela_Paper.pdf) retrieved 22 July 2020.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Display Development, Management and Conservation Team, Preliminary Report’, National Museum of Namibia, 2000.

Eventually the National Museum of Namibia decided to develop a new gallery called 'Cultures of Namibia' in 2005 with an exhibition called 'Nomads in sand and ice deserts', which was offered as a display by the *Westfälisches Landesmuseum* in Münster, Germany. The exhibition focused on various nomadic people from around the globe. The National Museum decided to expand the exhibition by adding some Namibian aspects in the form of displays on the OvaHimba, the San and the Nama. This led to the relocation of the San display from the 'Man in His Environment' and its reconstitution in the new gallery in 2010. The San display was renamed 'The San- Images and Identities'. It was no longer called the 'Boesmandeorama' as the term Bushman is considered derogatory and politically incorrect.

The new gallery presented an opportunity for engaging the source communities. In the case of the San exhibition, a workshop was held with representatives of the San communities in Namibia at the Owela Museum. The museum curators and their consultants presented the theme of the exhibition at the workshop and the views of the various San communities were solicited. It is reported that the San explicitly requested that the life-casts from the old San display should be included in a new exhibition.<sup>13</sup> The aim of the new exhibition was to engage with the histories of collecting, documenting, preserving and representing the San from the vantage point of the present. The exhibition established a shift from presenting the San as a primordial and vanishing race to underlining the dominant ideas and contexts in which the perceptions about the San were developed and promoted. One of the key highlights is that the San have always adapted to a changing society; they did not remain frozen in time as the dioramas had presented. The new display provides a more realistic impression of the San as a society within a nation; a society that responded and continues to respond to political, social, economic and technological changes.

The history of life-casting in Namibia was presented in the new re-appropriated display "as a testimony of former scientific treatment of the

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<sup>13</sup> Antje Otto, email to Goodman Gwasira, July, 27, 2020.



*‡Hoan and !Xoo participants of an orthography workshop at Omaheke San trust, Gobabis, 2006. Photo: Christfried Nauman. Courtesy of the National Museum of Namibia.*

San (and other people) and as historical evidence of a specific attitude and theory.”<sup>14</sup> The original San dioramas were moved to the new exhibition and acquired a new meaning from that of works of art. The methods and tools that were used in racial sciences were displayed and explained. The curators added information and photographs that revealed the asymmetry of power relations during the colonial era. A critical history of old dioramas and the ‘illusion of conserving a vanishing race’ was presented as an introduction to the gallery. The approach of co-curating the exhibition challenged some of the opaque views of the San. This approach of re-appropriation and co-curation is different from how other countries handled similar displays, notably, in South Africa. In the case of the Iziko Museums of South Africa the life-casts were removed from public display for ethical reasons. They were

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<sup>14</sup> National Museum of Namibia, *The San-Images and Identities*, (Windhoek: National Museum of Namibia, 2010), p. 15.

regarded as human remains because they had some DNA material that inevitably got embedded during the casting process.<sup>15</sup>

The National Museum of Namibia developed and employed a methodology that mediated an intrinsic desire to showcase Namibian cultures in a more dignified way. The differences between cultures ceased to be the focus of the new displays. The methodology of the re-appropriation, re-contextualisation and co-curation of historical displays was democratic. The communities whose cultures were on display decided the aspects of their cultures could be exhibited. However, the activity was not executed as a result of an official strategy for the decolonisation of the museum. Nevertheless, the re-contextualisation of exhibits at Owela represented a deliberate confrontation with exhibits that were once offensive. It was a first step in the process of decolonising the National Museum of Namibia. The approach appropriated the 'Boesmandeorama' and turned it into a space for telling the history of communities that were once considered 'historyless'. It disrupted the idea of presenting cultures as if they were frozen in history.

The approach described above can be viewed as a diplomatic way of confronting colonial museum displays and collections. However, it recapitulates the classification and ordering of people. I argue that the new gallery presents a form of postcolonial classification of some of Namibia's ethnic groups. Nevertheless, the strength of the approach lies in the consultative attitude of the museum administration and curators. This is critically integral to the process of decolonising African museum practice. This must however not be misconstrued as a decolonised museum since decolonising a museum cannot be limited to a focus on a specific display. The re-contextualisation has also not challenged the problematics of ethnographic collections.

The methodology did not decolonise because it did not transform the museum into an inclusive space. The Owela Museum still does not pro-

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<sup>15</sup> K, Schramm, 'Casts, bones and DNA: interrogating the relationship between science and postcolonial indigeneity in contemporary South Africa', *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 39, 2, (2016), pp. 131-144.



vide space for a new and transformed museum that is in the service to the community. A decolonized museum is a social project. It should address the social-economic and political struggles of the community rather than simply collect their history and culture for the consumption of international tourists. The local people still do not visit the museum, which remains, primarily, a destination for foreign tourists.

Museums should not be about the past or nostalgia. The argument here is not that historical ethnography should be ignored but that it should be used in the service of the local communities who should define the themes of the new museum that should be people-centred and people driven. The museum has to be of relevance to local communities. It has to be a social project that provides space for advocacy and activism.

For this to be achieved there is a need for a disruption of the traditional definition of a museum. Rethinking the purpose of the museum in a postcolonial context provides an opportunity of addressing the apartheid policy of spatial planning for example. One radical way of addressing such colonial structures is by bringing the museum to once racially segregated locations such as Katutura and Khomasdal in Windhoek, where indigenous and 'coloured' communities were confined during apartheid, in order to confront the historical and contemporary realities of segregation. Colonisation was structural and hence decolonisation entails undoing the complex structures of colonialism.

The museum in Africa in its current form is an alien concept and a colonial institution that collected artefacts and natural specimens as part of a project of amassing knowledge about the land. Decolonising museums cannot be done in isolation; it has to be done in collaboration with the people who were alienated by colonialism. For independent African states decolonised museums are relevant for the nation-building project. Decolonised museums are emancipatory, relevant and useful to the local communities. It is through inclusive and participatory approaches that museums in Africa can be relevant to local communities. The African museum should allow an engagement with cultural resources so that skills and indigenous knowledges are transferred to the younger generation. The future of the African Museum has to be an

institution that provides space for confrontation with the painful past. The museum should provide a platform or forum for addressing the past and contemporary injustices. The new museum that emerges from a historical background of multiple and brutal colonialisms will always have a troubled history. Thus a new museum should be rooted in the communities and confront the reality that culture is dynamic.

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*Elvira Espejo in conversation with Luiza Proença*

I am identity, I am culture, I am science,  
I am technology, I am economy,  
I am language!

Translated by Zafira Petersen

**Luiza Proença:** Elvira, since the first day we met, you have inspired fundamental changes in my outlook on life and I am very grateful for all our conversations.

I wanted to start with the story that you always tell, from when you returned to your community after finishing your degree, and you were asked what you had learned at university and how you could share this knowledge. These questions soon become crucial for how you think about the purpose of the university as well as that of museums. In other words, you start thinking about how to bring these institutions closer to the indigenous communities throughout Bolivia and how to make the knowledge come alive and be present in them. Most importantly, you recognize yourself as part of the community and establish a social contract between you; something which, in my opinion, many museum directors and curators lack in an increasingly globalized and deterritorialized world.

**Elvira Espejo:** Returning to the community from the city was very unsettling in terms of coming back empty-handed, and not being able to share something tangible, something to eat or drink as it's normally done in the family. Also, not being able to share my experience in more detail left me feeling deficient somehow. The community had high expectations and was very apprehensive, and there were comments and murmurs of a wasted effort. All this studying for a better job and then to return with nothing. At that point I felt like a failure, defeated by my own whims.

This sensation lasted for a while. But little by little, I managed to reintegrate into the community, and, just like in the past, we started ‘seeing’ one another again and engage in conversations. This opened up a space for the bigger questions such as “what did you learn at university?” and “what do you have to share with us?” These questions were a kind of self-examination for me. I was racking my brain to find the words to explain what art is, but only something very abstract came to mind like the chronology of art, Newton’s color theory, aesthetics or the different art styles. At college, I had only absorbed all the history of European and North American art.

On the other hand, however, I had something else in mind, something very close to my origins like the bibliography on the textiles of the Andean region between the years 1960-1980. And so, I began translating that bibliography into the Aymara language and then into the Quechua language, so that they could understand. When we first started organizing talks, only a couple of people attended, but it soon became evident that the topic was important, and the group began to grow and the talks reached groups of 50, 100 and even 900 participants from different communities and regions of the Andes.

Thus began a collective reflection, a way of thinking from within ourselves, a very moving reflection of how certain specific terminologies are used in language. In this way we seek to understand the content, the meaning of the entire textile operational chain, of how the mutual nurture of raw materials is carried out; fundamental steps in order to understand the management of the land, of the seeds and the care for the herds and plants, a mutual nurture of life.

The issue of obtaining raw materials, and their treatment and processing is fundamental for understanding the process and procedure of the entire chain of operations. Thanks to this systematization, we moved on to examine the structures and techniques of Andean textiles, which in turn led us to unfold an understanding of the archaeological, the historical and the modern contemporary. Finally, we worked with comparative thoughts or contrasting philosophies, such as Newton’s color theory, which was applied in all schools as a universal the-



*Elvira Espejo talking to the weavers from her community. Image courtesy:  
Elvira Espejo*

ory. However, owing to traditional natural dyeing techniques through water emergence, we also had our own color palette throughout the Andes, which shows us that our people possessed all this knowledge, cultivated at their level.

There is another form of education; of seeing, with your own eyes, your path and your process, which allows you to create your own logic. Moreover, there is the sonorous education of listening to the universe and making predictions based on its actions and, finally, there is the sensorial education of feeling with your fingers to distinguish textures. Being able to listen to yourself, using all of your senses, is a very advanced form of education.

All these types of community education of the peoples were eradicated in favor of a universal education that required whitening ourselves and pursuing the capitalist consumption pyramid without any sense

of responsibility. For this reason, it was very important to develop our own notion of what it means to be a Latin American people.

**LP:** One of your first acts as director of the National Museum of Ethnography and Folklore in La Paz (MUSEF) was to organize the exhibition series *La rebelión de los objetos* (The Rebellion of Objects), which presented the museum's objects beginning by salvaging the 'know-how', the collection of raw materials in nature and the processing of the material to their final form. At the formal level, the series maintained the conventional structures of conservation and presentation, such as display cases, thereby demonstrating that significant changes are possible from within institutions that are inherently disciplinary and expropriatory. To me, sharing this knowledge with everyone was extremely relevant for our present and future, as it eliminated the colonial and capitalist demand for appropriating knowledge and culture. In other words, while continuing to operate within the displays of Eurocentric exposure, you initiated an epistemological shift.

I was also surprised by the use of the word "rebellion" in the title of the series. In their nature, rebellions are oppositions to forms of authority and dominant power, and they are fundamental forces in politics and history. It seems to me that this is closely related to the theme of this publication, with the future of museums. Could you tell us about your thought process in choosing that title?

**EE:** That mutual reflection of understanding ourselves as a people, as a country and as Latin America, eased my path to the MUSEF.

The first step was to gather knowledge about all the collections of the cultural and documentary assets in terms of preservation, conservation, cataloguing and research in order to establish a museology and museography. That's where I realized that cultural artefacts were – according to my notion of thinking – rebelling, shouting: "I am identity, I am culture, I am science, I am technology, I am economy, I am languages and a whole being". This is how we in the communities perceive them; as whole beings with innate memories. This notion led me to immediately change the topic of the Annual Ethnology Meeting (RAE).

For several decades, the RAE has been committed to analyzing issues of the prevailing national situation at each historical moment. We propose that our event redirect its work to an internal need of the museum, taking into account the analysis of the objects and focusing mainly, although not exclusively, on textiles. In recent decades, only a small number of studies have looked in to material culture in Bolivia, whereas in other parts of the world, this issue has become key in new philosophical, archaeological, anthropological and sociological approaches, and given rise to a new 'theory of non-representation' in response to Kantian thought as proposed in the 18th century. Thus, we named the event *La rebelión de los objetos* as a means of critical reflection on the subject from the perspective of the mythological language of the people throughout the Americas.

With the aim to better understand the nature of the objects as well as their interconnectedness with the human environment, we changed the presentation concept of the RAE, which in the past were based on seminars, specialized round tables dedicated to four topics: 1) production chains in general; 2) obtaining raw materials; 3) the elaboration of the objects (textiles); 4) the social life of the object (textiles).

In rethinking the presentation concept, I focused on the accumulation of knowledge of textile practice already at hand in the communities.

With regards to the exhibition design and the catalogues, which we had many problems subsidizing, our focus will lie along the same lines. Expert curators are accustomed to focus on the most beautiful and best preserved objects and not on the complete chain of operations. This limitation emanates from the vertical formation through texts in academic education rather than doing and feeling things the way we do. This new dynamic leads to a shared comprehension where I share my experience and they share what they have learned.

First, we focused on the production of catalogues, following along the lines of the operating chains. In the second part, we aimed our attention at the style and chronology of archaeological, historical and ethnographic objects, and finally, we concentrated on the social life of the

object in the interaction with individuals, with the family or with the village.

Thanks to this systematic approach, we then proceeded to the museology, a reorganization of the exhibitions and, finally, we worked on the object display and spatial design. This discussion was the most complicated part. A group of weavers visiting the museum found it difficult to read the structure and technique of the textiles because they were glued to a frame and hung on the wall as if they were paintings. So, to reveal the works in their textile complexity, we used glass panels that allowed for a front and back view, thereby enabling a complete reading of the textile, which is very important. We applied this three-dimensional reading to all the objects and from the perspective of the artisans instead of a more simplified reading chosen by the curators. It is essential that the artisans and the museum designer work together in an inclusive balance, so as to avoid simplified or inaccurate language.

This new dynamic reveals the shortcomings of our academic specialists who only focus on bibliographical aspects and not on the process and procedure of creating and feeling cultural objects in a shared language with our great teachers. For a better integration, we have to build a bridge between practice and theory to be able to communicate in a broader and more educational language.

We were able to achieve this with the exhibitions *Tejiendo la vida* (Weaving Life) on the collection of textiles, *Moldeando la vida* (Molding Life), on collecting ceramics, *El Poder de las plumas* (The Power of Feathers) on the feather collection, *Alianza de metales* (Metal Alliance) on the mining and metal Collection, *Fibras vivas* (Living Fibers) on the wood and basketwork collection, and *Almas de la piedra* (Souls of Stone) on the lithic collection – all following the same leitmotif from 2013 to 2018.

We also included the production of documentation tools such as the catalogue *Realidades superlazas* (Overlapping Realities) on a collection of photographs of the “polleras” (wide pleated skirts) as well as images by traveling photographer Damian Ayma Sepeda from the collection in



the MUSEF archive. The substantial quantity of cultural and documentary assets in the archive made it possible to better contextualize the production of catalogues and conclude the first cycle of *La rebelión de los objetos* with the event on lithic materials.

The evaluation of past editions has allowed us to propose a new cycle from 2019 to 2025, titled *RAE – expresiones* (RAE – expressions) with the following changes: 1) The RAE will not be limited to the theme of the annual exhibition, but rather revolve around a related but broader theme; 2) a free panel with limited access will be incorporated; 3) instead of inviting foreign exhibitors, priority will be given to local exhibitors in order to strengthen the voice of our peoples' material culture.

As for the catalogues and exhibitions, we worked with the artists and craftswomen- and men from the communities with replicas of the works. This helped us to open our own museum shop which we called *Jatha MUSEF* (MUSEF seeds). The intent was to open a space for textile production from several associations, encouraging weavers throughout the country. Organized in their own communities of practice they can show, disseminate and sell works of great beauty and quality while at the same time preserving their textile traditions.

Another objective was to generate income in the rural areas which in turn is reflected in a revitalization of the community, in the craftswomen- and men and their families. This coordination is led directly by management and draws from the experience of working with artists and artisans all over the country. We jumped to the portable museum *MUSEF mas cerca de ti* (MUSEF – closer to you). The idea for a portable museum grew from personal experience: As a child, I never had the opportunity to visit a museum and so with this educational program, the MUSEF hopes to reach different departments all over Bolivia – rural, urban periphery or urban, with traveling exhibitions of photographs and replicas of the pieces exhibited in La Paz. The portable MUSEF makes long and short trips into the highlands (the altiplano and valleys) and lowlands (Amazon, Oriente and Chaco) of Bolivia,

mainly addressing students in primary and secondary schools and at university as well as communities in general.

This can support the museum in gathering information and help expand our database which in the past counted only twenty static entries and today holds more than a hundred entries called *pirwa MUSEF* (MUSEF data warehouse). This is a new endeavor to strengthen the systematization and storage of data. The structure is derived from the language of the operating chains, using specific terms from the original language and thus establishing a hierarchy from our viewpoint and strengthening our Latin America.

We also considered the educational material which was largely neglected throughout the history of the MUSEF and began exploring alternative publication formats such as stories and comics for children and young adults. The purpose remains the same: to disseminate the physical and oral heritage of the country's different cultures. From this objective emerge the first and second series *MUSEF te cuenta* (Stories from the MUSEF), and *MUSEF en viñetas* (MUSEF in vignettes). In 2018, in order to complement the production of social science in the best way possible, we also created the annual digital magazine *Thakhi MUSEF* (Paths of the MUSEF). The magazine collects internal and external research contributions related to topics of the annual RAE, and aims to present a diverse range of topics and angles and to create a dialogue with non-written languages, fundamentally on an audiovisual level. It maintains a broad approach in order to strengthen the essence of who and what we are, each from our different viewpoints.

**LP:** In the colonial capitalist society, time is viewed as linear and progressive and divided into past, present and future. That's why we talk about the "future of museums". We have clocks that turn according to the movement of the sun from the lands of the north. We use a Christian calendar and we need museums, books and films to learn about our history. We have lost the connection to nature, to geological time. Our time is completely associated with work. In the context in which you were born, how is the relationship with time? You once described

it like a bridge between past, present and future. Could you tell me a little more about that?

**EE:** It is true that it speaks to us of the past, present and future, although not in the language of the community, but rather in the language of the colonial capitalist society with the notion of them as our heroes, and shaping us according to their liking.

This always makes me ask myself the big question of how, according to our roots, we understand ourselves from within our environment. We don't view education as a pyramid structure like they do in the West. For us, education is gazing at the horizon in mutual respect with the universe as beings or persons, who care for the earth, the wind, the rain, the clouds, the water, the sun, the moon, the sky and the constellation, altogether creating a harmony of life. All these elements are like beings that accompany us. The same is true for plants, animals and objects where a mutual nurture and care for one another, is fulfilled. This type of education is only possible in the community.

The pyramidal approach to education from the mono-culture turns us into simple consumers in the colonial capitalist society without any sense of responsibility. Therefore, it is very important to understand this mutual nurture of an object and to care for it as a presence as it cultivates memories from the process of its creation and life cycle where many networks interact. In western education, the past is dead, but for us, it consists of living memories of life.

**LP:** Considering your experience, is there anything in the current structure of the museum that you would like to leave behind once and for all? And what is on the top of your list of things to change?

**EE:** There is a lot of work to do, because many museums have maintained the theory of representation according to 18th century Kantian thought. As a consequence, I have had to interrogate myself on where I come from and explore how I can contribute and with what kind of knowledge.

With *La rebelión de los objetos* I found the answer in that the objects are complex beings that hold a narrative of critical reflection; a reflec-

tion from the perspective of a mythological language of the Amerindian communities all through the Americas.

**LP:** One of your most frequently used research methods is language and oral memory, such as the *alientos* (breaths of life). Where do you see the space for orality in the museum?

**EE:** To me, language is primordial in order to understand the structural dynamics of a place according to the specific ways of thinking of its people and the deep epistemologies of the place, and not in the superficial way in which we are regarded from the outside. In this sense, it is very important to keep the oral delivery as a vibrant source from real life, which must be understood from the dynamic structures of linguistics as it has evolved, something that has been only scarcely implemented in museums.

**LP:** You worked as a researcher in prestigious museums such as the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. In your opinion, how could these grand museums play a more important role in the future?

**EE:** I am very grateful for the opportunity to have worked in these important museums that host a vast amount of collections to which we have no access, since we don't share the pyramid approach to specialized education that the museum requires. These are administrative complexes which lead to an inadequate separation. The most important role consists in integrating artists or craftsmen- and women, who are familiar with the construction of these pieces and so over the appropriate and adequate terms of the process and the procedure. The term craftsman- or woman does not imply inferiority, but rather a professional at the same level of the specialized museum official. Their experience, accumulated from one generation to another, is an important value that is often denied in this world.

Nydia Gutierrez

## Museums and Communities: Gestures of Reconnection<sup>1</sup>

Two revealing analyses of Europe's intellectual and political panorama at the end of the 18th Century provide interesting approaches – of very different interests- to the origins of the museum. The first one offers the vision of American historian Benedict Anderson on the shaping of nations and nationalism (Anderson 2016) while Spanish philosopher Marina Garcés concatenates ideas about a trauma<sup>2</sup> that goes back to the emergence of cultural institutions, also created in the same period. (Garcés 2016). Both make clear the political weight of the museum from its inception, which clearly underlies – as examples of interest to this text – its use to reinforce intentional processes of identity and identification or to shape biased narratives such as those left over from the colonial era. The political condition also calls into question the museum's chronic difficulty in interacting with those who give it its origin, *its constitution as such*;<sup>3</sup> with the expectations of its audiences, spectators, visitors or communities, regardless of how they have been called upon to apprehend them.

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<sup>1</sup> I presented a first approach to the themes of this paper in the cycle of debates entitled *Imagined Communities*, as part of the public programs of the 21st Biennial of Contemporary Art Sesc\_Videobrasil, in November 12-14, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> I assume the explicit term “trauma” even though the author does not use it in her lecture.

<sup>3</sup> The emphasis is mine to refer to the institutional transformation coming from the Deleuzian concepts of resistance, revolt and *constituent process*, to which Manuel Borja Vilel, Director of the Reina Sofia Museum, resorts, and which “have to do with the fact that we have to create institutional forms that are different”. At <https://artishockrevista.com/2018/03/19/entrevista-manuel-borja-villel/>

In this text, both Anderson's critical analysis of the creation of national states and Garcés' vision of the emergence of cultural institutions become analytical tools for the observation of some radically political Colombian museum practices, in the favorable post-conflict climate in the country, and during the process of urban transformation specific to the city of Medellín. Those practices in those contexts have at once fostered and benefited from, the subjectivation process that Brazilian philosopher and psychoanalyst Suely Rolnik calls *micropolitics*, which sparkles the transformative force of individual and collective creativity and involves a porous interaction with the otherness.

Thus, if the concept of nation looms in Anderson's work as a strategy of the European colonial administrations, here, the community is imagined as a corollary of spontaneous and horizontal flows of collective needs and aspirations, without vertical manipulation from top to bottom: as exercises of citizenship oriented towards the common good. Likewise, if Garcés' disquisition points to the original guilt of cultural institutions, the recognition of that failure is updated as a first step to ensure that museums fulfill their social function. Both perspectives lead to the point of coincidence with new urban subjects' way of creating longstanding cultural communitarian collectives and museum teams, under a broader vision of art and culture. Cohesive and empowered communities find an echo in notable gestures of Colombian museums to build emancipatory responses to the harsh environment.

#### OF THE EMERGENCE OF THE MUSEUM IN THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

For Anderson, an important factor in the formation of nationalities as “Imagined Communities,” which Europe favored, had to do with the loss of the sense of collective belonging to structures whose apex implied a divine presence. Until that time, kings and prophets had been perceived as mediators between the divine and the human, and this constituted a powerful socio-cultural bond of communal life; shared stories about “the teachings of life” or “the dynasty” provided sufficient answers to the demand for social cohesion, while a beginning

and an end mandated by eternal divinity, generated a perception of simultaneity with that higher sphere. With the rupture of these ties, he highlights quoting Walter Benjamin (Anderson 2016, 46), the emergence of the consciousness of “a homogeneous time, a vacuum measured by the clock and the calendar” that has characterized us since the late 18th Century. Imagining the nation “as a deep and horizontal comradeship,” came as a fitting response to the urgency to fill that gap.

In that environment, Anderson recognizes museums as the “material basis of the imagination” (along with censuses and maps). His assertion that “museums and the museum imagination are profoundly political” (Anderson 2016, 249) is part of a review of the use of archaeology and monuments in Southeast Asia to reify the symbolic content of the material cultural remains as a way of legitimizing the lineage of the colonial states. In this case, the narrative built on South Asian history generates the perception of antiquity that gives cohesion to the new nations. It clears that the shaping of nationalisms is more a result of colonial interests than the historical truth of the peoples who were merged or separated in the formation of such nation-states. In other words, perceptions of a deep collective nature, one-sidedly constructed, favored the consolidation of nationalisms in the way that Europe was creating them.

In the chapter “Memory and Oblivion,” Anderson unveils the manipulation of what is included in the narratives about the nation when he says, “every big change of consciousness brings with it characteristic amnesias. From such forgetfulness arises in specific historical circumstances, the narratives” (Anderson 2016, 283). He offers as an example the inclusion in English texts on national history, of the figure of “a great founding father that every schoolboy should call William the Conqueror. This child is not told that William did not speak English [...], nor is he told that he was a Norman who conquered the English”. There is no doubt that such risks have been realized with the obscure manipulation of nationalisms for despicable purposes: to justify authoritarian and intolerant regimes and to manipulate the configuration of biased accounts. A close example of the latter is the popularity

of the *paisa* demonym stereotype, which corresponds to the people of the city-region of Medellín, understood as white people. Despite the frustrating feelings that usually sclerosed definitions of any stereotype of demonym causes, some try to validate this for all Antioquians to the detriment of their great diversity of afro-Colombians, and indigenous peoples spread throughout the Department's immense geography.

Let us now turn to the beginnings of cultural institutions. Marina Garcés (2016) observes their genesis as support for the new modern state and its national project, as “the principal means of giving form and meaning to collective life.” The new political subjects would become protagonists of public action; the opening of museums, gardens, libraries, and archives would strengthen the exchange of ideas in the search for the common good. *The people* would consolidate and enjoy the triumph of democratic systems in a concert of nations. And no longer a category in the social stratification subordinated to monarchs and the powerful, they would occupy a more horizontal national class as citizens of the new republics.

However, the economic system's growing preeminence due to the well-known ideological and technological changes brought the need for productivity. The task of productivity fell to “the people,” who became the “working community.” Thus the substrate created by culture also provided the framework to construct a new form of production-oriented obedience. Ironically, this is also the turning point from vassalage to voluntary servitude, from being vassals to being what she calls “voluntary servitude” or “subjected subjects” (to use the Freudian expression). These servants voluntarily abandon their autonomy to obey the social contract. Even more forceful is her subsequent reasoning about the current disconnection of the places of culture with otherness. She elaborates the recourse to criticism by these institutions as an activity that ends up transforming itself, through intellectual juggling, into a self-criticism that makes them miss the point. Self-centeredness boasts of an external *they*. As long as the context is shaped by *they*, such distance will remain unaltered even if their discourses and projects are



proposed as social and political criticism: the museum won't be free of self-referentiality. (Garcés 2016)

#### NOTES ON CURRENT COLOMBIAN MUSEOLOGY: MEDELLIN UNDER MAGNIFYING GLASS

During the last decades, countless studies on the tangled causality of the Colombian armed conflict reiterate the invariability -or insubstantial mutations- of resistant social ills: exacerbated social inequity, an imbalance between urban and rural conditions, land struggles; and the very evolution of the war process. Its sixty-year duration has generated irregular armies and official military formations of varying size and scope and has also found resources in the drug trafficking business. The armed conflict also brought an overwhelming number of inhabitants to Colombia's cities through forced displacement from the countryside, which aggravates the well-known plight of most contemporary cities, particularly in the global south. Before Medellín,<sup>4</sup> furthermore, one must add the explosive mixture of armed political violence and drug trafficking, which turned many areas of the country, and especially that city, into the territory of a terrifying war between cartels of indescribable depth between the middle of the 80s and 90s of the last century. Medellín was the main (though not the only) focus of that war, and that earned it an unfortunate first place among the world's most violent cities.

But let's momentarily put aside the armed conflict to focus on the possibility of its termination. Although the so longed-for end has faced not a few opponents, the country was creating the legal, economic, and psychological support platforms needed for a transition to peace. One important summit was the Peace Agreement signed between the gov-

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<sup>4</sup> The focus on Medellín is because of the national and international urban transformation and also because it is the environment I know best, as I was Chief Curator of the Museo de Antioquia between 2012 and 2019.

ernment and the FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the largest of the irregular armed groups in 2016, after four years of negotiations.

Focusing on Medellín also reminds us that the peak of violence fueled by drug trafficking is a backdrop to the formidable collective reaction that substantially improved urban life in these same thirty years. A mobilization that gradually emerged from below and found an echo in successive city halls, NGOs, international organizations, and foundations linked to Antioquian companies, produced the change that justifies the international recognition received by the city from urbanism, architecture and other points of view. Because, remarkably, it occurred as a collective effort without a single leader, achieved by the activated agency of communities and efforts of many leaders with diverse backgrounds, mainly community pioneers, with no lack of successive mayors and leaders of official agencies. Medellín's urban transformation reveals a collective force far more potent than the codified advertising and marketing that seeks to co-opt it.

In the specific field of cultural expressions, today's continuity of vital dynamics still encourages the creative power of communities associated with artists, either as individuals or as collectives. They are still in force now, when the peaks of violence are not the same as at the end of the last century. Their persistence suggests that the notion of imagined community acquires a true sense of horizontal cohesion when it incorporates the social heterogeneity that constitutes any community, when sensations of union and belonging emerge from the collective reality and not as an imposed strategy. What stands out in the most notorious cultural activities thriving in the transformation of Medellín are multiple senses of horizontal cohesion and belonging, based on distinctive traits, habits, ethnicity, sexual inclination, or beliefs and values, which manage to activate micro-narratives towards the common good.

In understanding the environment that has been prefigured as “post-conflict,” another matter of interest for this writing is the connotation that – not necessarily based on theoretical contributions – the definitions of art and culture were acquiring from much earlier to

conform to the widespread idea of “urban culture,” where both are fused. This fusion's ambiguity has been useful to the city's change, on the one hand, and to the resonant positive reaction of cultural institutions before the popular appropriation of the term by youth and community groups. Cultural movements that became strong amidst the change took shelter under that elastic umbrella offering room for different components like hip-hop expressions (rap, break-dance, graffiti), renewed forms of indigenous pop music, and cultural traditions such as planting, among others. Of course, traditional artistic expressions such as craftsmanship with a strong symbolic value found its room as well.

“Urban culture” has also connoted ways of being alert and responding to environmental hazards in armed conflict: the understanding of the symbolic as a space for protection. In many experiences, these cultural activities have functioned as security spaces, especially for the youngest, since the various armed actors in Colombia have shown minimal respect for these niches of youth encounter.

Continuous exposure to physical, psychological, and emotional violence, and the power of the urban renaissance that emerged in parallel, have coexisted uncomfortably in the socio-cultural regime that prevails in Medellín. This contradiction explains the awakening of a subjectivation process that somehow sustains institutional resonance experiences with their context in the way we want to highlight. It's about the emergence of an urban subject drastically distanced from the ideal of the cosmopolitan city inhabitant, enriched by the intellectual exchange that the urban environment propitiates. Between the harsh contextual situation and the possibility of its transformation into a better urban life, an unprecedented subjectivity open to resonate with others emerges among the groups that assume denouncing and resisting such a situation—a similar proceeding echoes in museums' teams.

Both, these urban subjects trained by defiant and hostile ways to cultivate the elemental but elusive practice of understanding each other, as well as some institutional museum teams in frank dialogue with them, incorporate micro-politics as the process of subjectivation described by Rolnik. In both groups, this has to do with subjects flexible to *the*

*strange*, capable of installing themselves also “in the outside-of-the-subject to apprehend the forces of a world, whose emanations generate in the body of others, new worlds in a virtual state” (Rolnik 2018, 5). That is, individuals gifted for reconnection gestures between the museum and its constituent base, the communities out there.

When the museum resonates with this porous subjectivity, it is admitting it within itself; it acknowledges its condition as a situated institution. It is open to interaction with those who tacitly demand respect and egalitarian conditions, often with the confidence of those who have delicately carved out what they bring and what they expect to receive in any exchange. The museum shares the subjectivation processes which trigger its creative power and facilitates “transfiguration of the reality of oneself and the world... [because it manages]...to inhabit the experiences of the subject and outside-of-the-subject” (Rolnik 2018, 12) simultaneously; because it allows itself to be affected by otherness.

Cultural practices not necessarily focused on art blur disciplinary and institutional boundaries when they occur in art museums and also integrate artistic works. Their expansion becomes a cultural force where the mixed forms between art and culture share a central place that has been strengthened throughout the country in the post-conflict environment, with the involvement of diverse collectives seeking answers to the need for justice, reparation, and non-repetition.

As we have been arguing, different organizations in Colombia have responded with sensitivity and openness to the demands of the complex situation they have lived through, during the height of expanded violence and now in the more hopeful post-conflict reality. The National Centre of Historical Memory (CNMH), which is creating the National Museum of Memory, both in Bogotá, has studied their existence.; however, a theoretical body that has yet to be strengthened should record the diversity of known examples. We dare to cite two of them, corresponding to two very different typologies: the Museo Mochuelo in Montes de María, a rural area of the Colombian Caribbean, and the Antioquia Museum in Medellín.

Without a doubt, the less formally structured organization offers the most radical experience, the *Museo Itinerante de La Memoria y de la Identidad de Los Montes de María, El Mochuelo (The Owl)*, named after a bird typical of the Montemarine territory. This project crystallized after tireless community cohesion processes evolving in response to the continuous armed violence that plagued the region for decades. A paradigmatic example is the *Montes de María Communications Collective's* two and a half decades of work, which stubbornly built up awareness among the peasants to record the memory of the horrendous reality that seemed to give them no respite; to gather it as a non-repetition warrant and in the hope of some kind of reparation. Drastically away from the usual instrumentalization of data like this by the mass media, they dreamed of a museum, in which the wealth of cultural manifestations that identify them would be the ideal means to characterize it.

As usual in any Latin American country, 'El Mochuelo,' had to overcome the difficulties inherent in its rural and remote location. It gradually obtained international support (Ibermuseums, AECID, the French Embassy) and from prestigious national institutions like the Centro Ático of the Universidad Javeriana, until it received crucial museological support of the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH).

The laws and regulations stemming from the Peace Agreement created the CNMH and obliged it in turn to create the Museum of Memory of Colombia. All the baggage that the museum imagined by the Montes de María communities had collected came to augment the rigorous museological work done by this Centre to compile, as the object of the future Museum of Memory, the harsh reality – the voices – of the victims of the armed conflict. However, the itinerant nature of “El Mochuelo” and the warm welcome it has received in the territory must be credited in the first place to the *Montes de María Communications Collective*, with Soraya Bayuelo and Beatriz Ochoa Romero among its best-known leaders. The reliable support they managed to cultivate for it among the affected communities followed their genuine interest in the museum idea and the unusual strategy to make it travel to sixteen

different populations in the region. The *Colectivo* was able not only to learn about, and appropriate, the museum idea; they were able to disseminate among the communities (with the generous help of numerous professionals from different disciplines) the possibilities of museum practices “to tell the story of the conflict, testify to the community's resilience, and propose forms of reconciliation to move forward.” (S. Bayuelo, personal communication, 2019). Soraya Bayuelo described the tour already made by the museum on March 15, 2020, before announcing the closure of activities that very day due to the pandemic:

On March 15th, 2019, we opened our first nest in El Carmen de Bolívar; on the second flight, we were in Córdoba (Tetón); on the third nest, we flew to San Juan Nepomuceno and today our flight nests in San Jacinto. El Mochuelo is a tribute to the absentees and victims of the conflict in Montes de María; it is a space for dialogue and resistance so that memory may live on as a guarantee of non-repetition”. (S. Bayuelo, personal communication, 2020).

At the opposite extreme, the Museo de Antioquia in Medellín is the most structured of the organizations mentioned earlier. However, this institution soon realized its potential in the exceptional process of urban transformation described above and developed a long history of exploring strategies for working with diverse groups. Its current definition is that of *a museum of contemporary art that houses the most important historical collection in the region*. Although it is 140 years old, its change of location in the year 2000 meant a kind of institutional re-foundation, amidst the wounds still open from the highest peaks of violence and precisely as part of the intense change in Medellín.

The museum occupies the old Municipal Palace, which had been underutilized amidst the widespread deterioration of the city center. The generous donation by Fernando Botero, a native of Medellín, of two important collections, one of international modern art and another of his works, was the crucial impetus for the renovation of the historical center where this building stands. The renovation included demolitions, the opening of a large sculpture plaza, and the adaptation of the Palace. The museum soon established strong relationships with the communities that were organizing themselves since the 1990s in an

attempt to attract the attention of institutions sensitive to their motivations and activities.

The next phase began with a retrospective effort to revise its definition and guiding principles and coincided with the commemoration of the Bicentennial of Regional Independence in 2012. Since then, the museum has deepened its activities with specific communities in off-site projects, which have also had an impact on the updating of its Long Term Galleries and temporary exhibitions. Given the intense recent history of Medellín, the city marks the guiding principles and activities of the museum. With the normal variations derived from four successive General Directorships, the institution has maintained this vocation through the Curatorship and Education Departments. Precisely the evolution of the latter denotes the importance given to the work of reconnecting with its constituency.<sup>5</sup>

The exhibition calendar for the Temporary and the Long Term Galleries reveals the emphasis on these urban themes in the last decade. The city also informed a more recent project—in a closed team between Curatorship and Education—aimed at reconnecting with the immediate environment under the title “Museo 360”. Its intense programming has excellent achievements in the active integration of communities from the challenging city center neighborhood.<sup>6</sup> Among the most outstanding initiatives in the exhibition field, the museum held “Piso Piloto” in 2015, on the debt of the cities of Barcelona and Medellín with the housing problem, a project stemming from the close relations between the municipalities and urban research institutions from the two towns.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> At some point this department was explicitly named Museum and Territories.

<sup>6</sup> The leadership of these activities has been the joint responsibility of the creative and demanding Assistant Curatorship of Carolina Chacón and the team of the Education area.

<sup>7</sup> Exhibition organized by the Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona, curated by David Bravo, Josep Bohigas, Alex Giménez, Guillen Augé, Anna Vergés, Nydia Gutiérrez.

## POLIS: TOWARDS THE POLITICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF THE CITY

To convey the spirit, objectives, and activities of the museum in its new phase, I include here a summary of an exhibition whose curatorship I carried out at the turn of the year between 2018 and 2019, entitled “POLIS: Towards the Political Reconstruction of the City,” and from now on referred to as POLIS. Its introductory text, located in the reception space between the two Temporary Exhibition Halls of the museum, began with the following reflection:

The expansion of cities has accelerated dramatically since the beginning of the 20th century due to rapid population growth and massive migrations from the countryside. This immeasurable city suffered a progressive process of loss of its condition of political space oriented to the common good; the economic exploitation of the territory, based mainly on private interests and transactions, began to be the predominant producer of urban space. The city did not live up to the housing needs of these overwhelming majority. As Jane Jacobs presented it seven decades ago, it has become a mirror of democracy's weakness, incapable of guaranteeing equity and spatial justice to its inhabitants.

The exhibition included, in the first room and under the name of *Transactions for the Common Good*, three international urban projects, carried out respectively by ZUS, Zones Urbaines Sensibles, urban planning and architecture studio from Rotterdam; artist Rick Lowe from Houston, USA, and artist Monica Nador, from Sao Paulo, Brazil. The second gallery, entitled *El Barrio, la Ciudad*, showed five projects that have witnessed the urban transformation of Medellín, so often mentioned throughout this document: “Corporación Nuestra Gente”; “Agroarte”; “Huerteras de Oriente”; “Inquilinatos” and “Memorias del Agua.” A graphic introductory presentation to these collective projects showed the dates of their emergence and development in a timeline from the 1980s to the present, supported by testimonies from fundamental leaders of the urban change taking place during the same time-lapse.<sup>8</sup>POLIS

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<sup>8</sup> The well-known leaders Alejandro Echeverri, Carlos Montoya, Jorge Perez, Juan Fernando Zapata and the young architects María Antonia Betan-



also included in both the temporary galleries and the transition space works consolidated as natural museum guests: photographs, a painting, various installations, and typographical maps to activate and multiply the meanings of the themes addressed by the exhibition.<sup>9</sup>

All texts were constructed in an unprecedented exchange of endless conversations and written drafts, with the leaders of the participating projects, although the curatorship did the final editing. The following paragraphs collect texts, whether as paraphrases, quotations, or syntheses drawn from the many internal curatorial documents and room texts, to convey the ideas put forward about the need to overcome commonplaces and hackneyed dichotomies about the city.

The conventional logic of urbanism and architecture fell short in the face of the overflowing city. The dichotomy between the planned, legal city and the spontaneous, chaotic and illegal city is not enough to explain what urban life registers: the absurd crossings or the impossibility of dialogue and yet the permanent coexistence between both. The city demands new perspectives of analysis, new epistemological paradigms to enable renewed fields of understanding, and this opens a possibility for contributions from other disciplines, such as museology.

Similarly, simplifying ideas such as the opposition between the natural environment and urban space, *nature, and culture*, and their profound imbrication in the activities and psyche of those who live in the countryside and the urban context, are insufficient. The layer of rurality that expands in the city (the strength of urban agriculture, for example) takes away its validity. Witnessing the conflict's crossed forces in the countryside, artistic manifestations of the inextricable fabric of coexistence – or rather, “survival” – invalidate such simplifications.<sup>10</sup> At times the country seemed to follow a dystopian intention to separate the

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cur, Alejandro Henao and Mateo Diaz, of the Research Line Integral Improvement of Neighborhoods, of the UPB.

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix for a brief description of participating artists and works.

<sup>10</sup> A subtle but profound example is that of the survivors that Clemencia Echeverri poetically elaborates in the video installation with that title in this exhibition.

effects of the deep ties between the war for rural land and the essentially urban and globally linked political and economic activities.

Faced with this panorama, POLIS recognizes other forms of building citizenship, empathic positions with collective needs that seek to strengthen the common, through the diversity of strategies that its also heterogeneous conformations suggest. Their recognition of the need to introduce changes in the prevailing socio-cultural regime and their pecuniary logic brings them together in this opportunity as active leaders in search of the city's political reconstruction.

Hence, among the participating projects in the *Transactions for the common good* gallery, ZUS makes “a call for new spatial politics,” Rick Lowe deploys the transformation of the life of an African-American community as “social sculpture,” following Joseph Beuys. Monica Nador “transforms environments and builds citizenships” with the collective work of silk-screening on the walls of her neighborhood and other activities in her Community Center.

At the same time, “Corporación Nuestra Gente,” through Community Theatre, and “Agroarte” through the multiple facets of hip-hop and planting, reveal the complex reality of two longstanding community endeavors, filtered through art. “Las Huerteras de Oriente” elevates the practice of planting to the category of a symbolic bond of identification with people coming from the same place of displacement, which equally brings them together in defense of the territory. “Inquilinatos,” the National University in Medellín's project, supports recognition of tenancy as a valid form of collective housing whereas “Memorias del Agua,” of the Museum of Antioquia, empowers car washers in the city based on its long experience of mediation between informal workers and official bodies. Those two groups of projects in POLIS, deployed in respective rooms in the museum, as verifiable exercises that transcend rhetoric, also transcend the immediate in time and space; they are exercises of long breath and organic spatiality.

The challenge posed by art contextually involved to the extent some projects of POLIS are, denotes the museum's renovation. The art museum has to admit, as a fact, the propagation in contemporary art of a less restricted understanding of culture, which dissolves borders of

the art within the symbolism. After all, the institutional task is always halfway between theory and reality. These projects concern POLIS and the museum institution because they inscribe the places of their emergence, their objectives, and actions in the symbolic order. Their concrete achievements derive from this and their rooting in an active, *insti-tuting, and insurgent* micro-politics, as Suely Rolnik would say.

The challenge of doing it well introduces certain bittersweet observations into the intense experience of immersion in the city in search of traces of its political reconstruction. In the face of communities united by symbolic values, when their activities become exhibition material, the museum must find the degree of respect that assures fidelity to its self-definition, while respecting museographic principles. Honesty in recognition of its limits (Garces 2016) must be an obvious requirement when it comes to not supplanting its guests' voices in the museum hall. Plus, a delicate intermediate issue requires more consideration given the extreme entanglement of the embedded social issues, museum, and participating projects. It has to do with a consensus on some methodology<sup>11</sup> for bringing their ideas and actions to the exhibition format without eluding the crucial ethical questions entailed.

Ethics, after all, is always of individual genesis. Still, its power of dissemination can reach institutions and become an alibi to return to their original responsibility towards equity. The primary notion of *the people*, mostly *citizens* today, is an expression of our gregarious condition as a species, a natural claim to collective life. The inevitable reference to the pandemic that is waking up the whole planet at once says it crudely. Yet despite the many other claims the plague awakens, it also sheds light on the undeniable advances of the national struggle of this country in overcoming the malady of the internal war. It is not in vain that examples that slowly developed even in the atmosphere of internal warfare now stand out as movements in the right direction, toward more horizontal relationships among us all, like valuable gestures of reconnection between museum and society.

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<sup>11</sup> Carlos Betancourt, architect and exhibition designer, joined POLIS' curatorial team to develop such a methodology.

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## APPENDIX

### *Brief summary of content of projects included in POLIS:*

#### *THREE international urban-architectural practices:*

- The interventions: *Luchtsingel*, Rotterdam, *House of Homeless*, New York and *The Naked Museum*, Medellín, by ZUS, Zones Urbaines Sensibles, by architects Kristian Koreman and Elma Von Boxel;
- Project Row Houses” empowerment of African American neighborhood communities stimulated by artistic, cultural and economic activities led by artist Rick Lowe, in Houston, USA for 25 years;
- Jardim Miriam Arte Clube, JAMAC, community center for urban interventions, silk screening, video, literary cafes, led by Monica Nador from Sao Paulo, Brazil, for over a decade;

#### *FIVE Colombian projects, from Medellín:*

- two institutional-community projects: “Memorias del Agua”, from the Museum of Antioquia and “Inquilinatos”, from the National University in Medellín, which has provided legal support for the regularization and improvement of this type of housing.
- Two community projects of artistic collectives: “Corporación Nuestra Gente”, which has trained community leaders for four decades, and “Agroarte”, which has provided shelter and creativity for children and young people, and a channel for denouncing violence in the neighborhood, for two decades.

- “Las Huerteras de Oriente”, women who have been displaced for more than a decade, who see planting as identification between peers and as food sovereignty.

*FIFTEEN works of art:*

- four photographs of Medellín, by artist and photojournalist Luz Elena Castro
- painting by Fredy Serna, tireless Colombian painter of images of Medellín
- installation in ceramics by Colombian artist Juan David Henao, about the indivisible link between country and city, sowing and culture, land and building.
- installation by Colombian artist and architect Juan Ricardo Mejía, with photographs and a model where shadows of the chaotic morphology of the informal neighborhood are projected.
- multi-channel video installation by Colombian artist Clemencia Echeverri: powerful metaphor of tensions between the invisibility of the countryside and the city, generally unaware of the impact of urban decisions on rurality
- six typographical maps by Swiss-French designer Rudi Bauer, made with names and phrases that denote sensitive situations in two Medellín neighborhoods
- A sound installation by Colombian artist Carlos Uribe reflects the pride of belonging of Medellín’s people to their city, while ironizing about the corruption in its government.

*José Eduardo Ferreira Santos and  
Vilma Soares Ferreira Santos*

## The Future of Museums, Houses, Lajes

Translated by Zoë Perry

Taking care of the world's memories means being mindful of every community that inhabits it. It means looking after the affective, dialogical, and relational aspects that are built inside museums around the world. The Acervo da Laje—conceptualized by us as a house, museum, and school—seeks to democratize access to memory in the urban periphery community where it is located. It also seeks to collectively establish collections, experiences, and existences both within and beyond its surroundings. Our political and cultural intent is to establish ourselves as a space of resistance to the repeated erasures and invisibilities that have historically surrounded us as a vulnerable population. To do that, we do not divorce the museum experience from its affective aspect. In other words, we have to see and recognize ourselves in the collections as people who make history.

Our story begins in a house, a place whose memory traces back to our very first experiences, steeped in recollections and artifacts. We believe that the domestic experience nurtures our existence, as well as offers an intimate relationship with the works, whose curation is continuous, collective, and dynamic.

Created in 2010 after research conducted on the invisible art works of local beauty, the Acervo da Laje is considered the first museum in Salvador's periphery, located in the neighborhood of São João do Cabrito, in the railway suburb. The idea for the museum grew out of my doctoral research in Public Health on the impact of homicides on young people on the city's outskirts, which noted how a lack of memory work affects the lives of local youth and their ability to look to the future.

Currently, the Acervo da Laje consists of two houses. The first contains a permanent exhibition of historical works and artifacts from



*Installations and activities of Acervo da Laje, Salvador, Brazil.  
All photographs Courtesy: Acervo da Laje.*

the neighborhood. The second, in addition to hosting other temporary and permanent exhibitions, has ample room for various activities and workshops. We envisaged the museum as a place of education, in the fullest sense of encounter, revelation, and balanced dialogue. The museum educates the visitor's gaze, awareness, and perception of the world.

For us, the future of museums must be more democratic, affective, relational, and dialogical, both with their material works and with new technologies that allow people to experience the mnemonic and intergenerational role these spaces convey, without barriers or boundaries. We believe that this future must also be more participatory, in which children and their families can learn about art and access education in their communities. In the future, it is important that museums occupy new spaces in cities, getting closer to the people, and thus reducing the somewhat elitist nature of their existence. At the Acervo da Laje, we confront this challenge head-on by insisting that museums produce aesthetic and territorial displacements, causing disruptions between urban centers, and their large collections, and the peripheries, with their community collections.

For us, perhaps the Acervo da Laje is, like so many other museum experiences on the peripheries, a force that allows or elicits reflection on these displacements and the urgent need for new spaces nowadays that highlight the home as a museum space that holds life in all its dimensions.

We want museums that dialogue more, that are guardians of the world's memories without losing the diversity of its people, their aesthetic manifestations, and ways of being. We also want community collections to be valued, visited, and to coexist with other museums. And so, this text arises from some of the experiences we've had. It is a form of dialogue.

### THE HOME AND THE LAJE

Since the Acervo da Laje was founded, we have tackled the issue of understanding the home as a place of cultural production, of establishing new ways to promote encounters between people and the memories



produced in the peripheries. Even in places plagued by social vulnerabilities, there is a wealth and diversity of actions and development that indicate the memories of these people and territories exist, but they are often made invisible by not having institutional spaces to address them. These spaces are usually found in the centers of large cities and house collections that have nothing to do with local life.

So within the scope of provocations of what can be considered a museum, the home, or the concrete slab rooftop, or *laje*—an emblematic space in Brazilian periphery communities<sup>1</sup>—established itself as a possible site to expand the existing social aspect in order to also become a space for sharing aesthetic, artistic, and mnemonic conceptions. This initiative presents itself as the start of a deepening relationship and establishes an initial encounter between people from the periphery and a museum in which these people recognize one another and can create bonds of belonging. For this to happen, the closest structures we have are not the big city centers, but our own homes and *lajes*—family spaces seen as a legacy established by generations in the peripheries.

In contexts of social vulnerability, populations are segregated from the right to memory and artistic enjoyment. Faced with an often stark reality, a life of deprivation, museums can stimulate new representations of reality. They foster other options for coping with life and can lessen the effects of violence or other susceptibilities.

We believe that, because it is in the periphery, the Acervo da Laje leads to a phenomenon of aesthetic displacement within the city, Brazil and the world, and a breaking down of existing prejudices against its location as a violent or inaccessible place. This is because people acquire new learning and restructure their ways of conceiving the antagonisms which are so present in these times of hatred and *fake news*.

The existence of a collection or museum in the periphery, built collectively and that tells the story of its people, brings to the fore the

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<sup>1</sup> “Laje”, in Portuguese, is a horizontal slab of reinforced concrete commonly found in low-income housing in Brazil, where it plays an important role in social activities. (E.N.)

recognition of the life that exists in that place, as well as the creative power, feelings, and actions conducted by them, acting as a sort of mirror where people can see and perceive themselves as both creators and participants in life. One specific case is Salvador's railway suburb, which, starting in the 1960s and 1980s, became known for fostering social movements in the fight for fundamental rights such as education, electricity, basic sanitation, health and access to culture. The Acervo da Laje emerged in this place, where we learned early on that we have our own history, that we had a quilombo called Urubu, headed by a black woman, Zeferina, in the woods of Parque São Bartolomeu; that we were invaded by the Dutch; that we fought against the dictatorship and continue to organize to keep from being reduced to stigmas. In this sense, we understand that the memory of the periphery is also made by the land and people. By walking the streets to visit the Acervo da Laje's two houses, people learn that the museum experience is relational, and happens when, for example, visitors buy water, have lunch in the area, meet people, take the boat across, go by train. In other words, it is a process of affective immersion in which houses and *lajes* become spaces for encounters and re-encounters with previously invisible stories that are triggered and provide a new way of looking at the many memories that inhabit these different cities within the same city. This displacement also triggers the phenomenon of seeking, of pilgrimage through invisible narratives. In our case, artists from the peripheries and the material history of these regions, seeking to restore the mosaic of our memories that are scattered but present.

With this, we are able to have previously unthinkable interactions between the city center and the periphery, which stimulates the local economy, allows interaction between local artists and artists from other places, creates bridges for the exchange of techniques, artistic and curatorial processes, donations of works, promotion of arts-led initiatives, and associates these previously stigmatized places with experiences of innovation and creativity, generating national recognition. One example was in 2019, when the Acervo da Laje was awarded the Brasil Criativo prize in the Heritage and Arts/Quero Museu Vivo category, up against initiatives from museums in Rio de Janeiro and Porto Alegre.



*Installations and activities of Acervo da Laje, Salvador, Brazil.*

*Photograph Courtesy: Acervo da Laje.*

Since the fire at the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro on September 2, 2018, we have noticed an increase in visits and interest in the Acervo da Laje. The fire generated a lot of uproar in society and a greater understanding of the importance of spaces for memory, culture, and education. Faced with an unprecedented tragedy for world museology, other spaces also began to be perceived as part of this patchwork of lost memory, now found in its fragments, part of a whole that people want to access.

Understanding the home and the *laje* as places of culture and memory have been a provocation and an attempt to bring people closer to their histories. All of this also comes from the recognition that many houses on the periphery of the city, both today and in our childhoods, have always been places where one could admire old hand-colored photographs, paintings, altars with devotional saints, as well as sculptures by often anonymous artists that were placed in homes and bars. One such example was a sculpture by Adilson Baiano Paciência, found in the

neighborhood bar. When the owner died it was thrown out, but it was soon found and gave rise to one of the Acervo da Laje's most important exhibitions. It allowed us to gather a few dozen more wooden sculptures by this important artist and bring his story to light, generating reflections on the importance of works of art in the periphery and their educational role, of forming a consciousness of love for beauty and artistic creation. The sculpture's migration from a house to the trash, and then to the Acervo da Laje, brought an artist and his works back to life, which would certainly have been made invisible in Brazilian art history and to the local community.

Similarly, the home and the *laje* can be thought of as a museum space when they carry the materiality of art and memory within them, both in the structure and in the interior. For example, during construction of the second house of the Acervo da Laje, at the suggestion of architects Federico Calabrese and Ana Carolina Bierrenbach, we gathered porcelain and ceramic tiles from various parts of Brazil and the world, from a broad range of time periods. We were also offered many pieces by artists such as the Bahia-based Argentine artist, Reinaldo Eckenberger (Buenos Aires, 1938 – Salvador, 2017); Prentice Carvalho, an eighty-year-old tile worker who lives in Ribeira, in Salvador; and sacred artist Claudio Pastro (São Paulo, 1948 – São Paulo, 2016). These pieces were used to cover counters, the entrance, and the internal staircases, and became a different way of exhibiting the works and the way they interact with us and with those who visit us. We held a workshop with the artist Zaca Oliveira to transform the stairs into a work of art, attended by young people from various districts of on the outskirts of Salvador.

We often gathered the tiles on Ribeira beach and the beaches of the suburb at low tide, when we found thousands of pieces that had washed up or that had previously been seen as garbage and have now become an important part of the Acervo da Laje. The sea surrounding us is also an agent of the communities' memory, in an affective relationship that tells our story and that of our ancestors.

## NEW FORMS OF INTERACTION AND REINVENTION

In times of such unexpected change, we see the future of museums as a major challenge. If we think of them as large structures that never get renewed, we must address the lack of access and dialogue. One of the forms of interaction we offer at the Acervo da Laje is the promotion of activities and virtual visits through photos and videos posted on social media. We regularly post about visits, works, videos of musical performances held at the space, in addition to talking about internal work we are doing, such as cataloging and creating new collections. The dynamics of life continue and it's interesting to see how, with each post, something gets incorporated into people's aesthetic and affective experience. They are moved by seeing the works over and over again, and this is part of their affective relationship with the space and its residents. In this sense, each social media post reignites the experience of memory, democratizes the collection, brings in new perspectives on the materiality and the importance of *permanence* in these fluid and uncertain times.

This adaptation to a previously unthinkable future brings the challenge of an increasingly decentralized curatorship, interacting with audiences in other ways. A photo can bring back narratives that give meaning to lived experiences that were cut short by social distancing situations, as we've experienced in 2020. In other words, we perceive the function of memory as a way of envisioning a horizon, and in this sense the permanence of museums in times of instability points to our need for art, history, and memory in order to face the fear of impermanence.

One thing we feel in relation to the contemporary work of memory is bewilderment in the face of so many changes and attempts at erasure by ideologies that are anti-minority and anti-cultural diversity, trying to silence voices and their expression. We have systematically witnessed continued attacks on culture and the arts from a far-right government that aims to be hegemonic, cracks down on praxis, and disrespects freedom of expression. In addition, we've seen a reduction in incentives for historical minority achievements, demonstrating a vision of power that



*Photograph Courtesy: Acervo da Laje.*

ignores the creative processes that have acted as symbols of resistance in authoritarian times.

To contend with this complex time, we've had greater engagement with grassroots movements from various communities, local and foreign universities, the Public Prosecutor's Office, and artist collectives from the periphery, in addition to engaging with public authorities on agendas that promote diversity, the right to the city, and to memory. Partnerships with institutions built on respect and equality, without oppression or nods to neocolonialism, are also part of this momentum of confrontation.

There has always been a dynamic cultural movement on Salvador's periphery. With or without resources, we have carried on with our activities and during this period we have been supported by an extensive network of mutual collaboration.

Museums must be creative and have the ability to reinvent themselves. We believe that museums need to be more flexible and dynamic in order to become more effective. For example, when people come to the Acervo da Laje, they often want to take a plant cutting or seeds with them. This is something that might not be allowed at a stricter museum, but here it's possible and fosters new experiences of continuity and creates memories, instilling care and habits. We might even say people have started to form new collections from this encounter.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges for museums in the future is their sustainability, or how they can survive in unpredictable situations due to the pandemic, the deaths caused by it, the experience of mourning, the impossibility of traveling, the breakdown of the economy, as well as other factors that will certainly arise, and that we aren't able to predict. In this new reality, we hope that new forms of solidarity and empathy will emerge, particularly because, given the existing difficulties, museums and peripheral projects will need support to continue their activities.

How can we do this? Certainly with the help of society, communities, alliances with well-established museums, and possibly some funding with partnerships that allow for this gradual return of services. We don't know whether that will happen or not, but it is our hope.

## CITIES AND DIVERSITY

Museums are part of the cities where they're located. In our case, the outskirts of a large city, Salvador. Faced with social inequalities and a historical scenario of exclusion, we have sought constant dialogue on issues surrounding rights to the city and to memory. This involves thinking, discussing, and making proposals based on changes that occur, primarily with the process of gentrification. Making room for these discussions is a way of affirming life and ways of coexisting within society.

Given that there is currently a demand for representativeness, museums will play an important role in democratizing narratives and engag-

ing with an increasingly diverse society. In order for this to happen, we must listen and examine who develops these actions and how this representativeness is enacted.

The demand for a diversity of narratives leads to the question of invisibility and the historical erasures we rise up to face. Museums, therefore, must go against these erasures, both in the diversification and democratization of their collections, promoting black, feminist narratives, among others. Often diversity is not respected, and we must give voice and authorship to those who are entitled. We organize talks whenever possible at the Acervo da Laje on topics such as “Feminist Lenses”, “Black narratives: visibility in black women in the arts of Bahia”, “Body manifesto”, “Pay for my art”, “Art on the periphery of Salvador”, and others. These events are produced in collaboration with Fabrício Cumming and people who wish to share their career paths and their artistic processes.

#### THE MUSEUM IS OURS, THAT'S WHY WE EMBRACE IT

In the future, we hope that cultural spaces will increasingly draw on the collaboration of residents and artists in establishing their collections, as they become more collective and diverse places, by expressing and listening to local voices. This takes place based on an affective relationship established between people and their experiences with the museums that are close to them, because they identify with them and want to be part of history, often donating works and artifacts that they want preserved and made known to the entire community. We are also constantly salvaging important artifacts for local memory that have been discarded. Finally, we have the practice of routinely buying works we consider important to the memory of local artists and this takes up a significant portion of our research work.

It is necessary to somehow break down the gap that exists between society and museums, and make people recognize themselves in them and naturally take an interest and belong to them. Perhaps one of the most important experiences of those who visit a museum is saying “that's





*Activities of Acervo da Laje, Salvador, Brazil.*

*Photograph Courtesy: Acervo da Laje.*

ours” or “that’s mine too”. A feeling of belonging is developed from this encounter and the affective experience that can occur when we’re faced with something that surprises us or reveals itself to us, resulting in a desire to share, to be part of that story and the memories told there. Developing this feeling can be difficult at times. On the other hand, we can see how much people in society have been involved with museums and other cultural institutions by understanding their importance as spaces for research and the production of knowledge.

At the Acervo da Laje we have witnessed a few important moments where people recognized themselves and began to be part of this experience: at our first public exhibition, in 2011, held in an old house in Novos Alagados; at the 3rd Bahia Biennial and the 31st São Paulo Biennial, both in 2014; at the Ocupa Lajes Project, developed in collaboration with producer Leandro Souza, in 2016 and 2018, respectively, as well as at the various workshops, roundtable discussions, guided tours, musical performances, and other meetings and projects.

We can bear in mind two important aspects for museum work based on our experience in the Acervo da Laje: 1) foster encounters with children and young people in the space and with the works as much as possible, and 2) facilitate activities that address a range of expectations, desires, and artistic languages. The first is really a lifeline: if children and young people learn to visit and engage with museums, we will certainly have people to continue this work, especially when they are *educated* within the museum space. That is why we hold classes on the Acervo da Laje premises, where students have access to both the works and new acquisitions. They also meet people from around the world, leaving behind the notion of a ghetto, where the periphery is often relegated, and expanding their horizons beyond it, but within it. The second aspect pertains to a range of activities that must be guided by discovery and a broadening of the expectations of the people involved, never diminishing their engagement with the works, with memory, and with artists who are able to convey their techniques and ideas to new generations.

When a museum embraces people, there is a huge possibility that they will embrace the museum back. Museums are also made by people, by the professionals who make the experience happen. Perhaps the biggest challenge is to respect the diversity, the poetics, and the life of each museum, each house, each *laje*.

*Christine Litz*

## Museum of the Future. From Dining Room to Kitchen

Although the museum as a public institution is a relatively recent invention, it is based on the self-conception of being geared towards a nonfinite future. At the same time, the museum itself is a constantly changing organization that must continually reinvent itself in order to provide a meaningful and fruitful platform for the production and reception of art and to provide convincing and stimulating frames of reference. The 250-year history of the public institution of the museum shows that it has undergone enormous changes up to the present day – from the Wunderkammer and research collections to collections for teaching purposes, which are often linked to a library, from an outdated, unmodern place where history is kept in a kind of ivory tower, which is only attractive to specialists and enthusiasts, to today's topical, forward-looking, popular, fashionable venue, which is aimed at a broad public.

The ability to change has always been important, but it has undoubtedly become even more so in our dynamic times of globalisation, decolonisation and diversity. The approval of these conditions comes along with the need for constant reflection and self-examination for museums. However, museums must not only act ethically, structurally and organisationally with regard to their internal collection and exhibition policies, but they must also always reckon with the possibility of being existentially questioned from outside. For not only does art go to its limits, shifting and crossing them, or even questioning the very basis of these limits itself, but the museum must also face up to these associated expectations in terms of goals and structures and own them. These changed expectations are also reflected in the recent discussion of the ICOM (International Council of Museums) about the definition of the museum and whether there is a need to adapt and expand the role of

museums. The five main fields of action mentioned so far – collecting, conserving, researching, exhibiting and mediating art – should be supplemented by the attitude with which this should be practiced, namely decidedly participatory, inclusive, diverse and open to all.<sup>1</sup> How should museums brace themselves for the future? What does a museum of the future need?

### WELCOMING “L'AVENIR”

The future describes an abstract period of time, which is characterized above all by the fact that it can not have been experienced before. We are therefore dealing with the unknown and are therefore dependent on speculations, premonitions and imagination. Often, what we imagine for the future is dramatically overloaded and overdrawn and expands in a negative extent from catastrophe and destruction and in a positive extent from ideal conditions to paradise. But what has not yet been achieved is their spiritual prerequisite.

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<sup>1</sup> Current version of the ICOM definition of a museum: “A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.” <https://icom.museum/en/faq/what-is-icom-definition-of-a-museum/> [last accessed on 24.03.2020].  
Suggestions for a modified definition of a museum: “Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.” <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/> [last accessed on 24.03.2020].

Museums come up to such a state of the not yet achieved, for example, whenever they actually produce art, i.e. whenever they commission the artist or realize a proposal from the artist for a particular exhibition or situation. This is a procedure that has not been practiced for too long and which has seemingly massively increased in the last two decades. This is related to digitalization, which makes everything immediately accessible and is always eager for something new. It is based on simultaneousness and independency of ones own physical location. Such a new production poses immense challenges for a museum on different levels. For one thing, the infrastructure of a museum simply does not correspond in any way to a studio in which art production actually takes place. On the other hand, everything in a museum is aimed to preserving art for an infinite future to the best of our ability and belief. The conservators, who are usually involved in the installation, are employed to handle the finished art objects and have specific rules on how to treat them –from white gloves to the appropriate intensity of light and humidity. Often they apply these despite the knowledge of fundamentally contradicting the wishes or requirements of the art / the artist. Because their topmost guideline is the standards and rules of a museum. As an art historian involved in the production of art, one has to change the perspective and the relationship to art from a keeper to an eyewitness / accomplice. One gains a completely different insight into the work of art through the information that emerges in the course of this production process. With regard to future viability, the important question arises here as to which of this information is documented at all, or how it should be documented, and which levels of this knowledge are accessible or how they can be made accessible.

The crucial point that connects the commissioning of a work of art with the concept of an (unforeseeable) future is that no one knows exactly what will be the result at the end of this process –this applies to the artists as well as to the institution. It is a joker, a *carte blanche*, which is inevitably associated with a fundamental openness to experiments, processes and change, as well as a willingness to take a risk and to fail. You cannot know what you will get. This is why the French philosopher and deconstructivist Jacques Derrida distinguishes between

a predictable, foreseeable future and “l’avenir”, i.e. someone who is coming, whose arrival is completely unexpected: “In general, I try and distinguish between what one calls the Future and “l’avenir” [the ‘to come]. The future is that which – tomorrow, later, next century – will be. There is a future which is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable. But there is a future, l’avenir (‘to come’) which refers to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected. For me, that is the real future. That which is totally unpredictable. The other who comes without my being able to anticipate their arrival. So if there is a real future, beyond the other known future, it is l’avenir in that it is the coming of the other when I am completely unable to foresee their arrival.”<sup>2</sup>

Approaching the future on the basis of unpredictability inevitably means to include new and unexpected claims or conditions as a constitutive part of this operation. In order not to constrict and determine the unpredictable and at the same time use it as a productive force, it must be free jazz, a mental freedom of action, and for this reason I feel encouraged to write this text in the first person:

### NO PATERNALISM, NO APPROPRIATION

I imagine the Museum of the Future as a teacher who is willing to think about ideas and who is willing to learn. Equipped with the ability to consciously perceive (including self-awareness) and to be wide awake. The museum of the future is a public place of exchange, encounter, learning, and negotiation, and insists on presenting not only secure, popular positions, thoughts, and ideas that are widely accepted, but also those that have been marginalized, suppressed, or otherwise pushed aside. Art is neither to be utilized nor patronized by the museum.

When I imagine a museum of the future, I think of it as a kitchen. This is probably because I often perceive museums today as a dining room

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted from Derrida, 2002, documentary film, director: Kirby Dick und Amy Ziering Kofman, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFdpYLLuexg> [last accessed on 24.03.2020].

where visitors are invited to dine, where the museum cooks, where the dishes are carefully set and the best silverware is diligently polished, where the order of the food is chosen, where the light are dimmed and where the seating arrangement is cautiously contrived. During the meal, guests can take part in the conversations, the topics of which have already been determined. Imagining a kitchen not only strengthens the production side, but also serves as a metaphor for the actual basis of representation.

Receiving guests in a kitchen is quite different from inviting guests into a dining room. The kitchen I have in mind is open to the public, without commercial interests, and everyone is invited to contribute. Everyone brings something, not a complete dish, but ingredients, knowledge, skills and stories. Some things cook, burn, simmer. There are a lot of things to negotiate among the participants, this is as much as possible a setting for “l'avenir” and maybe there will be something to eat at the end. Maybe not. But there will certainly be experiences, encounters and exchanges.

At this point it is particularly important for me to emphasize that the kitchen and cooking metaphor ought not to be equated with the production of art. It should not imply that the viewers themselves should make art. The invitation to participate refers solely to the fact that the engagement and preoccupation with art can be an occasion to act with one another, to exchange ideas, to learn from one another. It is about the basic conditions and possibilities for these forms of examination and appropriation that the institution should promote and enable. Can (and should) participation be combined with emancipation? Can (and should) participation lead to real partaking?

So what does it mean to imagine a museum as a social place that is open both to as many people as possible and to as many different forms of knowledge and education as possible? The public museum belongs to everyone and no one in particular. It is expected to reach young and old, initiated and non-initiated, rich and poor, people from the surrounding areas and foreigners from afar. The basic question is: How can the museum of the future address, develop and use this potential?

If one takes the concept of the social place seriously and acknowledges the radical basis of this approach, it is neither an educational tool nor a marketing strategy. It will change hierarchies, representations and the production of knowledge. It will transform the museum into a platform for “l'avenir”, ready for a friendly takeover. And perhaps in some cases even have an impact on the art production itself.

### INVITATION TO THE KITCHEN

Based on these open considerations, which the invitation to the kitchen entails, I would like to concentrate on two areas and discuss their potential for the Museum of the Future: Firstly, the qualities of (physical and mental) encounters and secondly, activation and participation.

On the first point: qualities of (physical and mental) encounters – in the sense of not familiar, understood as the 'irregular', the 'abnormal', the 'atypical', the 'conspicuous' and as an argument for 'controversial', 'questionable', 'insecure', 'open', 'unsecured'.

A visit to a museum always implies an accumulation of physical bodies. In experiencing art, the body is asked not only to be the carrier of the head, but to position itself in space, to stay, to move, to physically interact. Through art one becomes aware of one's own body. Not only in the moments when you ask yourself how close you are allowed to approach the art and if you are allowed to enter the work of art at all? The works of art not only bring their own object-like quality with them, but also create a physical space in which one has to orientate oneself. In addition, you do not just bring your own body with you, you also encounter the bodies of other visitors when you visit the museum. One also perceives oneself physically. How do the others perceive you? How do they move? How do they perceive the art? How do I actually look at it, how do I move, what does art do to me? A visit to a museum is an embodiment in the literal sense of the word, and this can be seen as the outstanding (unique) feature in our digital age. A visit to a museum is not only a significant mental occupation and stimulation,



but also a physical experience – and without the physical experience it is not complete.<sup>3</sup>

Robert Morris' (1931-2018) interactive sculpture *See Saw* (Figure 1) can be seen as a symbol of physical experience. It was created at the Museum of Contemporary Art on the occasion of the exhibition *Make Active Choices. Art and Ecology. How?* (17.5.-18.9.2013) and which he made in 1971 for an exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London. On the basis of his interest in the relationship between man, art and the environment, he proposed to stage one of the first participatory exhibitions. The intention was for exhibition-goers to become active participants rather than passive spectators and for the art to be perceived not only visually, but with one's whole body. The work was part of the exhibition *See Saw*. Both the Tate curators and Morris himself were surprised about how the show was received by the visitors: after five days, the exhibition had to be closed because of "exuberant and excitable behaviour."<sup>4</sup> The work was exhibited once more at Tate Modern in 2009. *See Saw* is ecological in a double sense: the work is made of wood and is manufactured for each new exhibition, therefore transportation and storage do not apply. Over and above this, the artwork obtains a meaning in the context of this exhibition, which is at once a metaphor for the impact and effects of our actions. Our every action causes a reaction; the actions of other people influence one's individual position. The exhibition-goers on the wooden surface of *See Saw* are constantly on the move and need to relate to one another. Balance, if possible at all, is only fleeting; everything is fluid, i.e. it tilts over to the other extreme and remains in motion. As soon as there are more peo-

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<sup>3</sup> This text will be finalised in March 2020, a period marked by the global coronavirus pandemic. This is accompanied not only by the (life-saving) necessity of socially distancing oneself from the others, but also by the perception of one's own body and vice versa the body of the person opposite as a carrier of a highly contagious, potentially fatal disease. What effects this will have on future coexistence cannot be foreseen at this point in time.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/performance-at-tate/perspectives/robert-morris> [last accessed on 24.03.2020].



*Figure 1: Robert Morris 'See Saw', 1971, installed at Museum für Neue Kunst during the exhibition Make Active Choices. Art and Ecology. How? 17.5.-18.9.2013. Photograph by: Marc Doradzillo*

ple on *See Saw*'s wooden surface, communication takes place, at least physically.

#### PRAISE OF NOT KNOWING AND UN-LEARNING

As a guest you also bring your body into the kitchen. Tastes, knowledge, habits and skills are decisive. One interacts, one takes special diets into consideration, one learns from each other and together. One makes new experiences in the sense of 'unknown so far', 'different from before', also in the sense of 'strange', 'exotic', 'unaccustomed', 'unusual' as motivation to be open and unbiased. It is also a new experience, which can gain a lot from being nescient, from not knowing and being able to unlearn.

If one were to succeed in applying this openness for getting to know and trying out the new and different to the things that one supposedly controls, knows and can classify, then one could focus on art that has been pushed out to the fringes, the supposedly secondary, the marginalised. Museums, which operate as time machine, can (and should) render ruptures, discontinuities, inconsistencies and asynchronicities visible via their objects. They work in the context of broader social and scientific discourses, which pay particular heed to the effects of art-historical canonisation. This applies to the treatment of art made by women as well as to the treatment of non-European art; the questions that arise in this context, such as who dominates which networks and what are the blind spots of a purely Western perspective, lead to an opening-up, expansion and recognition of contemporaneities, as well as the representation of diversity. Consequently, we argue for a re-evaluation to ascertain whether a given œuvre passes the test of time and is able to inject relevant and interesting information into today's discourse on art and art history. On the one hand, an œuvre may contain criteria specific to the era in which it was created that might, in turn, enrich contemporary debate. For any artwork that cannot be seen in a new light, be repeatedly re-evaluated and understood anew, is inevitably destined to become outdated and obsolete.

A museum of the future must dare to identify the incompleteness of the museum collection – incomplete in the sense of an art historical canon – as an independent framework and to engage in or actively initiate new surveys. The author and art critic Hanno Rauterberg wrote a plea for more willingness to take risks and against walk-in encyclopaedias. Under the title *End with Eternity*, he proposes an alternative, namely “a museum that frees itself from the usual documentation obligations. A museum that gets involved in unconventional, unusual art histories. [... Here we can see] what the future could look like: incomplete, provisional, daringly changeable. A museum that resists eternity and thus lives what modern art has always dreamed of.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.zeit.de/2012/34/Kunst-Deutsche-Museen> [last accessed on 24.03.2020].

What changes when we openly perceive and think? What if we learn from encounters? When we critically examine the knowledge we have acquired, the categories we have used so far, and the anticipations that go with them? As a result, they certainly need to be adjusted and eventually revised, as in the case of the “Lovers of Modena”, an archaeological tomb discovered in 2011 and celebrated in the media worldwide as a symbol of eternal love: two skeletons from late Antiquity holding hands. The slightly smaller specimen wore a bronze ring and was identified as a woman tenderly turning her head toward the man. Due to the location of the cervical vertebrae, it was assumed that both heads were originally facing each other: the perfect confirmation of a love that endured after death. However, recent<sup>6</sup> chromosomal analysis has revealed the pair to be male. The basic assumption that they were heterosexual lovers has influenced the inferences and attributions within this frame of reference – the position of the skeletons, their jewellery and their relative sizes – and, therefore, quasi dictated the conclusions. A scientific fact now forces us to re-examine the relationship. The men buried 1,500 years ago may have been lovers, of course, but they may also have been friends, relatives, comrades in arms. And perhaps a bit of everything mixed together.

### CATALYSTS TO GET SELF-AWARENESS

On the second point: activation and partaking – participation and debate in the sense of “another catalyst for repeated, participatory and thus emancipated engagement”.

The idea of including activities of visitors other than looking dates back to the late 1920s: El Lissitzky (1890-1941), *Cabinet of Abstracts*, for example, offers the viewer changing viewing conditions. The walls can appear white, grey or black, depending on the position of the observer.

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<sup>6</sup> Federico Lugli et al., Enamel peptides reveal the sex of the Late Antique ‘Lovers of Modena’, in: *Scientific Reports* 9, 11.9.2019, Art.-Nr. 13130, URL: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-019-49562-7> [last accessed on 24.03.2020].

In order to further integrate the activity of the visitors, movable partitions and rotating glass display cases were integrated. By continuously shifting them, new room combinations could be created inside the structure. Some fifteen years later, the Museum Art of This Century, which was opened on October 20, 1942 by Peggy Guggenheim (1898-1979) and designed by the architect Friedrich Kiesler (1890-1965), appealed to all the senses with a high degree of active visitor participation. Another twenty years later, DYLABY, an experimental exhibition of six artists, perceived as a dynamic labyrinth, was set up at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam: Jean Tinguely (1925-1991), Martial Raysse (1936), Per Olof Ultvedt (1927-2006), Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008), Daniel Spoerri (1930) and Nicki de Saint Phalle (1930-2002). The above-mentioned exhibition of Robert Morris at the Tate Gallery (now Tate Britain), which was closed in 1971 after only a few days because some of the numerous visitors had already seriously injured themselves in the first few days of use, the works of art did not withstand heavy use, which increased their potential to cause harm, and the show was criticized in the press for being “no more than a playground.”<sup>7</sup> Almost forty years later, the Tate, together with the artist, is venturing a new edition of this exhibition. Under the title *Bodyspace-motionthings*, it was reinstalled in 2009, this time in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern. The concept of the usable artworks arose out of Morris' thoughts as a Minimal Art artist in the late 1960s on three-dimensional works of art – “The object has not become less important. It has merely become less self-important”<sup>8</sup> – and the desire to view the entire situation, including space, light, and one's own body. In an interview with BBC presenter Melvyn Bragg, Morris explained that the exhibition was “an opportunity for people to engage with art, to become aware of their own bodies, gravity, effort, fatigue, their bodies in different conditions.”<sup>9</sup> The objects are catalysts for getting self-aware-

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<sup>7</sup> Nigel Gosling, The “Have-a-Go” Show, Observer Review, 2 May 1971.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Morris, Notes on Sculpture I, 1966, pp.222-235, p. 234, <https://arts.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/robert-morris-notes.pdf> [last accessed on 24.03.2020].

<sup>9</sup> The Arts this Week, BBC Radio 3, 29 April 1971.

ness. What has changed in the forty years inbetween the two exhibitions? In the meantime, both the museum and the visitors have become familiar with the idea that a work of art makes direct demands on the viewer's body and that it requires action as a prerequisite for reception.

### PARTICIPATION THAT CAN LEAD TO PARTAKING

The work on a museum of the future as a museum and urban utopia is based on this expanded concept of art. Since 2013, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MNK) and Georg Winter (artist, urban researcher, Budapest, Völklingen) have been working and researching together with various participants. The focus is on the planning and development of a new museum: Neues Museum für Neue Kunst (NMNK).

Georg Winter invited the audience to participate in the planning of the NMNK. They were able to participate directly in the planning of the action plan and contribute to finding the form of the building by jumping on the proposed model. (Figs 2-4) Georg Winter calls this anastrophic urban planning and describes it as follows: The jump is carried out from a wide and rigid aluminum stepladder that is about 110cm (ca. 3 1/2 ft.) tall. This type of ladder generally serves as an aid used in constructing architecture. Preemptively inserting it into the planning context pulls the rug out from under traditional planning processes and procedures. When standing at its top and looking down onto the 4m<sup>2</sup> (ca. 43 sq. ft.), 2 x 2m (ca. 6 1/2 x 6 1/2 ft.), foam model of the central area of town surrounding the proposed new museum building—with the 60cm 'L' of the museum rising up out of the middle—one quickly wonders about the constitution of the body before the jump (residual stress), how the planning motivation is embodied, how to jump, what role the loss of control occupies, and—finally—how the body will land on the model of the town to shape the museum model. The dynamics of jumping off differ, as do in-flight poses, and different people land accordingly. From the ambitious flip to the simplest form of just dropping, face first or twisting in the air, active participants generate a diversity that is benefits the design models. Loss of control and bodily composure make their mark on the model scenario. Through the indi-



*Figures 2-6: NMNK- Planning jumps  
Photographs by (clockwise from top left): MNK,  
Otto Schnekenburger, Sophia Trollmann, Thomas Kunz, MNK.*

vidual bodies and the collective possibilities for comparison, the sensory-motor planning brings new aspects of the bodily constitution of space into the planning process. The planning jumps develop a choreography that is experienced in terms of a collective planning experience in spite of the individual jumping.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Christine Litz, Georg Winter, *Anastrophale Stadtplanung – Das Freiburger Springen*. Freiburg 2020.

What I like very much about this kind of invitation to participate is the fact that not only an intellectual but also a physical contribution can be made. It takes courage to jump and not be able to influence the results. If you think that through knowledge production you might not be found exclusively in the one area of intellectual expertise and maybe knowledge production is not the purpose but a tool to broaden your horizons on different, not only intellectual levels in order to emancipate yourself. As Georg Winter puts it: “[...] planning leaps make it possible to eliminate control and habitual standards for a decisive moment, in order to initiate a new collective planning process through the direct and justified appearance of bodies, in order to plan what cannot yet be planned.”<sup>11</sup>

Participation in the planning process in the form of jumps on the proposed architectural model attempts to keep the question of cultural urban development alive, to show structural alternatives for the methodology of planning participation. If one wants to go from participation to partaking, it will entail considerable changes on the side of the institution as well as on the side of the visitors (better: users). In particular, this means that those who want to participate and realize their participation must also give something: Partaking is not a one-way street on both sides, but it is a matter of give and take.

## POSSIBILITIES AND NECESSITIES

When I imagine the museum of the future as a kitchen, I don't just mean that as a metaphor, but I also think there should be a real dining kitchen, a public space where people can gather, meet and exchange ideas. Freely accessible and not commercialized. There should also be flats where people from abroad (experts, lecturers, artists) can stay and work on the museum's programme and agenda. This would open up opportunities for encounters in various forms and constellations. As invited guests, they could make their scientific and artistic prac-

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



tice available over a certain period of time in scheduled and random encounters and forms.

With its exhibition projects, research, and programmes of events, the museum is committed to a long-term study of the topic of the ideal museum. The concept of the “ideal museum” is a mental model that (a) is positioned in the future and (b) involves a constant comparison of the present state relative to the result of this ideal image. At the same time, the concept of the ideal museum is simultaneously an instrument that can be used to analyze specific options for action. The ideal museum thus brings focus to the current and future possibilities and necessities involved in shaping the museological institution. In doing so, it acts in a manner fittingly described by the coinage “glocal”: anchoring and representing the global within the regional. Thus, it not only provides a regional image of Freiburg as a town in Southern Baden, but also of Freiburg as a town in Baden-Württemberg, in Germany, in Europe, and—finally—within the Western world. Accordingly, the MNK is not a regional museum, but a museum located in a region, and it thus voices its aspiration to strive to keep pace with the national and international discourse on art and, in this way, to be simultaneously local and global as well as to be unmistakably no less than exemplary.

My work on the museum of the future is inspired by the sense of the possible, as the author Robert Musil formulated it in his book *The Man Without Qualities*:

“But if there is a sense of reality, and no one will doubt that it has a right to exist, then there must also be something that can be called a sense of possibility. For example, the one who possesses it does not say: Here this or that has happened, will happen, must happen; but he invents: Here could, should or must happen; and if something is explained to him from something that it is as it is, then he thinks Well, it could probably-probably be otherwise. Thus, the sense of possibility could be defined almost as the ability to think everything that could just as well be and not to take what is more important than what is not.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* 1976, Band 1, p. 16.

*Alison Kearney*

## Confronting the Museum: Artists' interventions as critique

### INTRODUCTION

Art museums are fraught spaces where histories of conquest, matters of cultural value, control and display are performed in the post-colonial era. Exacerbating the problem, the association of the art museum as a space for those already inducted into the field of art alienates potential visitors. Feelings of exclusion are exacerbated by the discourses of high-art, which like other academic discourses, maintain their exclusivity as a means to retain their cultural capital. Despite the deconstruction of relationships of power and representation in new critical museology, in practice, little has changed. Today, art museums in Africa face a persistent challenge: how do art museums break free from their troubled pasts and invite dialogue with their constituents, while continuing to preserve and display the artworks in their collections which, in many instances, are themselves remnants of colonial legacies? Furthermore, given the troubled legacies of museums in Africa, what might a future museum in Africa look like? To engage with this conundrum, and related issues of cultural value and display facing art museums in Africa in the 21st century, I created an interactive art project called the *The Portable Hawkers Museum*; a portable museum without walls, that questions what is valued in other museums, and how those values are communicated through their forms of collecting and display.

Through a critical reflection on *The Portable Hawkers Museum* project, in this essay I suggest that for art museums to have a future in Africa, they must invite and engage in critical dialogue with artists. With reference to specific examples, I argue that by mediating between the museum, their collections and their constituents, artists challenge

inherited museum practices, and call into question the hegemony of the institutions of art. In the process, dialogues between the various agents are established through which museums might start to reimagine themselves. Acknowledging that a dialogue necessarily involves discussion from all participants, I consider some audience responses to the *The Portable Hawkers Museum*. I conclude that recognition of the inadequacies of the term museum is needed in order for museums in Africa to address the problems of their colonial legacies and their alienation from their constituents. Finally, I propose that artists, museum curators and heritage managers work with the concept of the museum ‘under erasure’ when thinking of museums futures in Africa.

#### INTRODUCING *THE PORTABLE HAWKERS MUSEUM*

Bulalazonke! Kills everything! This is just one of the poisons available from street vendors in Johannesburg, South Africa. *Bulalazonke* has a special place in *The Portable Hawkers Museum* (figure 1) an ongoing artwork which I initiated in 2003 to explore questions of value, access, and the power relationships that are made visible in museums in general through, among other things, their practices of collecting and display. *The Portable Hawkers Museum* collection consists of items bought for R20 or less from Johannesburg street vendors. My interest in the street vendors began with an attempt to represent my experience of the Johannesburg inner city. The street vendors’ stands that line the streets of inner city Johannesburg are an icon of the city: their displayed goods enliven the pavements and influence the ways that pedestrians interact with each other when moving through the city. Among the items in *The Portable Hawkers Museum* collection are insecticides, rat poisons, toiletries, and personal accessories, such as cheap jewellery, and cellular phone accessories. Like all objects in museum collections, the objects in *The Portable Hawkers Museum* have been removed from their original contexts, and placed within a museum collection where they are held up for a particular kind of looking. However, unlike in most other museums, the objects in *The Portable Hawkers Museum* collection are inexpensive, mass-produced, and new. The contrast



*Figure 1: Alison Kearney, Souvenir or I love the Portable Hawkers Museum: Insects and Crawls Killer, 2003. Photographic documentation of a public performance in Newtown, Johannesburg. Postcard (edition 300), 11cm x 16cm.*

between the objects that hawkers sell and the kinds of objects found in cultural history museums like the Museum Africa emphasizes the ways in which museums are removed from the daily lived experience of people in the cities in which museums have been erected. In choosing these objects I am demonstrating their socio-cultural value in as much as they signify aspects of contemporary urban life in Johannesburg, as well as assigning a new cultural value to them by placing these objects within *The Portable Hawkers Museum*, which is both an artwork and a museum that focusses on an aspect of contemporary urban street culture in Johannesburg.

As with the birth of the museum in Europe, museums in Africa came with a particular civilizing mission, used to legitimate the Western supremacist agenda. For example, as Carmen (2016, 43) notes, the

Johannesburg Art Gallery (the first art Museum in Johannesburg) was established through the efforts of Lady Florence Phillips in 1910, with the intention of bringing “culture” to the colony, and to “contribute to the peoples’ enlightenment and content.” The Johannesburg Art Gallery Collection, (assembled by Hugh Lane at the bequest of Lady Florence Phillips), consisted primarily of late 18th Century and early 19th century British and European painters, because the art that was produced at the time was less expensive than paintings by ‘the old masters’, and in the colonies

“...there was an unchallenged belief amongst English-speakers that the metropole, not the colonies, should provide the type of museum and collection that would enhance the colonial quality of life and serve as incentive for local creativity” (Carmen 2016, 38).

Fast-forward a hundred years and despite the deconstruction of relationships of power and representation in new critical museology, (see for example Crimp 1993; Dewdney et al, 2013; Pollock et al 2006), in practice little has changed. Today, art museums in Africa face a persistent challenge: how do art museums break free from their troubled pasts and invite dialogue with their constituents, while continuing to preserve and display the artworks in their collections which, in many instances are themselves remnants of colonial legacies? Furthermore, given the troubled legacies of museums in Africa, what might a future museum in Africa look like?

#### THE PORTABLE HAWKERS MUSEUM EXHIBITION PRACTICES

*The Portable Hawkers Museum* parodies certain cultural history museum practices while also imitating some of the customs that street vendors enact as they unpack and pack up their stalls every day. Occupying multiple roles in this ongoing art project, I am museum director and volunteer docent, curator and artist, thereby calling into question the ideological separation of these activities and the role of the artist in contemporary, participatory art practices. As with other museums, *The Portable Hawkers Museum* has an acquisitions and exhibition policy,

a visitor's book, and an arcane taxonomy, that draws attention to the importance of ownership, and the ways in which museums impose systems of classification on the objects in their collections. However, the appearance and portability of *The Portable Hawkers Museum* stand in deliberate contrast to the monumental permanence of other kinds of museums. In drawing attention to the differences between it and other kinds of museums, *The Portable Hawkers Museum* presents a proposal for an alternative museum practice.

Just as the storage container in which street vendors store their goods serves as the transport container for the goods and acts as a surface upon which street vendors display their wares, so the entire Portable Hawkers Museum collection fits inside the museum box, which doubles up as a plinth. Inside the museum box, each object has a specific place, cut out of the velvet cushioning which lines the interior of the portable museum. When closed *The Portable Hawkers Museum* box resembles a packaging crate and a small coffin, evoking Adorno's allusion to the association of museums with death. For Adorno (1967, 175) the museums' association with death is evident in the very word museum, which comes from the German word *museal*, that describes objects "to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying." He declared that "museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art" because in them objects are transformed as they are removed from their original contexts and functions (Adorno 1967, 175). Separated from everyday praxis, museum objects' original cultural meaning and value is lost. Although it is coffin like in appearance, *The Portable Hawkers Museum* challenges the death of the object in the museum through exhibiting its collection as part of performance art works in public spaces. In the process, the objects that were removed from their everyday social contexts when they became part of the museum collection are returned to the streets, and reanimated as the museum is opened in different locations.

The museum box is strapped to a trolley, that I use to transport the museum to different public spaces where the opening of the museum is enacted (figure 2). The performances begin with a methodical packing



Figure 2: Alison Kearney, *Souvenir or I love the Portable Hawkers Museum: Put Your Best Foot Forward*, 2003. Photographic documentation of a public performance in Newtown, Johannesburg. Postcard (edition 300), 11cm x 16cm.

and unpacking of *The Portable Hawkers Museum* collection. As they are unpacked, each object is carefully laid out on a piece of velvet, before being arranged on the museum box. After the unpacking is complete, *The Portable Hawkers Museum* resembles a hawker's stand, with its wares on display as can be seen in figure 3.

*The Portable Hawkers Museum* exhibition policy is such that this portable museum and its collection can only be exhibited in public spaces, not in other museums. Documents of the public performances, or representations of the items belonging to its collection can be exhibited within other museums and art galleries. These documents include videos of the performances, as well as photographic documentation of the objects within the collection, and other *The Portable Hawkers Museum* paraphernalia that I have created as part of the larger art project. Admittedly contrived, this policy symbolically robs other museums



Figure 3: Alison Kearney, *Souvenir or I love the Portable Hawkers Museum: Portable Museum Now Open*, 2003. Photographic documentation of a public performance in Newtown, Johannesburg. Postcard (edition 300), 11cm x 16cm.

of their primary power, which is access to the ‘original’ work of art, instead giving that access to passers-by on the street.

### THE SUCCESS OF FAILURE

While *The Portable Hawkers Museum* undermines the power of traditional museums, I am aware however, that within the project there is a danger of reproducing one hegemonic structure with another, albeit a small one. In naming my artwork a ‘museum’ I appropriate the power that museums have to ascribe certain value to the objects of material culture within them. I have also appropriated some of the street vendors practices to reinforce the separation of museum practices from everyday life. These acts of appropriation enable me to draw attention to museum practices of collecting and display, via parody. This artwork can therefore be seen as a statement on value within institutions



of art, not unlike the statement Marcel Duchamp was making when he exhibited his readymade *Fountain* (1918). By designating a mass produced urinal as art and placing it in the field of exhibition (first by entering it into an art competition in 1917, and later through making replicas of the lost work in the early 1960s), Duchamp drew attention to the workings of the field of art, and the values within discourses of art (see de Duve 1996). In the process, artists like Duchamp and the subsequent generations of artists he inspired challenged art's institutional framework and their own agency within it. However, despite their intentions to challenge the hegemony of museums, the once celebrated historic and neo-avant-gardes have subsequently been critiqued for their ultimate failure to overthrow those institutions of art. Foster (1996) suggests artworks such as *Fountain* (1917) did not disrupt the conventions, but rather, can be understood as a performance of the conventions which left the conventions intact.

Like the avant-garde artists before me, I too find myself in the seemingly irreconcilable position of being engaged in deconstructing the hegemony of the institutions of art in which I operate and that I rely on. I address this paradoxical position through employing parody, a strategy which Hutcheon (1985, 6) defines as a form of “imitation characterised by ironic inversion.” The intention of parody, which often makes use of comic devices, is to critique the ideology underlying the parodied, or hypo-text. Hutcheon (1985, 6) maintains that parody is a form of “repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity.” Through ironic inversion, parody enables me to explore the paradoxes within this project. One playful exploration titled *Souvenir, or I Love The Portable Hawkers Museum* included the production of a limited edition (three hundred; all signed, numbered and stamped with the museum stamp) of a set of five post-card souvenirs for the portable museum. The images on the post-cards (some of which are reproduced in figures 1-3 of this chapter) are screen grabs from the video documentation of a public performance outside the Museum Africa in Newtown Johannesburg. The Museum Africa, formerly known as the Africana Museum, opened its doors at its current location in Newtown in 1994; the year of the first democratic election

in South Africa. Although the collection, which was started in 1933 by the Johannesburg Public Library, consists of cultural history material from across Africa, the current museum displays focus on the history of Johannesburg, geology and the discovery of gold, and aspects of Apartheid (South African History Online, 2019). The documentary footage was recorded by Business Against Crime, a private company that monitors security footage from the CCTV cameras that they installed throughout the Johannesburg CBD, whom I approached to collaborate with me for this particular performance. Their brief was to film my performance as if I was engaged in something illicit. The resultant film shows surveillance footage of me being followed; the camera zooming in on my activities, before roaming around the surrounding area watching for other suspicious activity, since the CCTV cameras were in use for their intended purpose at the time. The use of surveillance footage here is a deliberate visual allusion to ways of looking within museums. Making use of surveillance footage also heightens the feeling in these works that some kind of transgressive act is being committed- an aspect that I accentuated by taking the photographs for the postcards of the documentation of the public performance as it was played on a CCTV monitor. The shape of the television tube, lines from the LCD monitor, and blur of movement are visible in each image, further emphasising the portability of *The Portable Hawkers Museum*.

Blurring the boundaries of original and reproduction, this work is a play on Benjamin's (1982, 218) famous proclamation that, after the age of mechanical reproduction, the reproduction challenges the authority of the original work of art, because each reproduction jeopardises the "historical testimony and thereby the authority of the original." According to Benjamin (1982, 218), the value of the original work is diminished with each reproduction, because "many reproductions substitute a plurality of copies for a unique existence." The symbolic value of the original work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction is no longer that it is a 'singular original authentic work', but rather that it is the original of many reproductions. In this artwork however, the reproduction is elevated to the status of 'original work of art', because each postcard is signed, stamped, dated and numbered by the artist. The act

of stamping, signing, and numbering each postcard (1500 in total), in some ways mimics the bureaucracy of large institutions like government run museums. The farcicality of this repetitive stamping points to absurd acts of repetition within other aspects of *The Portable Hawk-ers Museum* project, which work together to emphasize my parodic intention. A further irony within my work is that these postcards will ultimately be more valuable than the other artworks, since none of the other works are signed. Thus, as with Duchamp's original gesture, this artwork foregrounds the fetishisation of the artist's signature, pointing to how the aura (value) of the original artwork comes from its having been made by an artist.

My investigation of issues to do with the value of the reproduction, and the relationship of the reproduction to the original work of art is continued in an artwork titled *Authentic Reproductions*, an installation of plaster reproductions of some of the objects from *The Portable Hawk-ers Museum's* collection at The Skulpturhalle, Basel (figure 4). Managed by the Basel Antikenmuseum, The Skulpturhalle houses a collection of more than 2000 plaster reproductions of revered sculptures from antiquity, among them the Winged Victory of Samothrace and cases of all the remaining sculptures of the Parthenon Temple in Athens, which were displayed to show their original arrangement as part of the museum's 'Parthenon Project' (Museums.CH, Online). These plaster reproductions were made for didactic purposes, so that art students could learn from the so-called master sculptors, as well as to reinforce the values that underpinned Enlightenment European culture.

In this installation, the plaster reproductions of objects in *The Portable Hawk-ers Museum* collection were arranged in vitrines amidst the permanent displays, creating a dialogue with the other plaster reproductions in the museum (figure 4). Each object was carefully placed on red fabric and accompanied by two labels, the first identifying the plaster object as an "Authentic Reproduction", and the second referring the acquisition number of the object that was reproduced from *The Portable Hawk-ers Museum* collection (figure 5). Their arrangement recalled the way in which the collection is displayed when *The Portable Hawk-*



*Figure 4: Alison Kearney, Authentic Reproductions, installation view of an installation at The Skulpturhalle Basel, 2004. Dimensions variable, mixed media including plaster, paper, card, fabric.*



*Figure 5: Alison Kearney, Authentic Reproductions, detail view of an installation at The Skulpturhalle Basel, 2004. Dimensions variable, mixed media including plaster, paper, card, fabric.*

*ers Museum* is open to the public, alluding to the street vendors' stands in Johannesburg. In making plaster reproductions of the objects belonging to *The Portable Hawkers Museum* and juxtaposing them with the plaster reproductions in the Skulpturhalle, I challenge these notions of value because the objects that I reproduce are not considered valuable within the discourse of art history. The irony of my plaster objects is that within western discourses of art, they are ultimately more valuable than the plaster reproductions, because, although they are reproductions, they are also 'original works of art'. This irony accounts for the somewhat cheeky title '*Authentic Reproductions*'.

In the few iterations of *The Portable Hawkers Museum* project that I have discussed here, it is clear that while *The Portable Hawkers Museum* may have failed to replace other institutions of art, it certainly proposes an alternative method of engaging with audiences, thinking critically about the kinds of objects in the collection and how to display them. In parodying certain museum practices, while turning other museum practices on their head, this artwork acts like a two-way mirror that reflects the institutions and their audiences back at each other: aspects of power related to the institutions of art are made visible to street audiences, and, through the documentations of the performances that are exhibited in galleries, the institutions are reflected back at themselves. As such, this project is an example of how through drawing attention to conventional museum practices artists can question the hegemony of institutions of art. This is the primary way that I see that artists can help museums in Africa to create dialogues, to reach new audiences, confront their colonial legacies and imagine new futures. However, this is not a one way process- for this strategy to work, there must be dialogue between all the agents in the field of exhibition, which is why engagement with the audiences that interact with me is an important aspect of the project.

ENGAGING WITH AUDIENCE RESPONSES TO *THE  
PORTABLE HAWKERS MUSEUM*

The context in which I open the museum to the public has an impact on how the museum collection has been received. Each context invites new and varied responses that give new inflections to the meaning of the objects in the collection. For example, when I opened *The Portable Hawkers Museum* in between two street vendors in an informal market outside the Museum Africa, in Newtown, Johannesburg, passersby thought I was also selling my wares as seen in figure 3. When someone asked me how much my items cost, we talked about why even though the objects in my collection looked the same as the objects sold by the vendors next to me, they were not the same because the objects in my display were part of a museum collection. This difference highlights the manner in which the museum changes the value of the objects within them. It is this power that museums have to transform common objects into objects of cultural and aesthetic value that Danto (1981) described as the ‘transfiguration of the commonplace’ in his book of the same title, when reflecting on the difference between Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box (Soap Pads)* (1964) and the boxes of Brillo one might see in American supermarkets. Furthermore, having deliberately set up *The Portable Hawkers Museum* outside the Museum Africa, I suggested to people who interacted with me that *The Portable Hawkers Museum* should *replace* museums like the Museum Africa. I posed the question: “what if museums were not in civic buildings, inaccessible and intimidating, what if museums were in the streets amongst the people?” It is interesting that even people who had not been inside the Museum Africa rejected my provocative proposal. Many argued that we need museums to preserve culture, but paradoxically they didn’t feel that the museum they passed everyday was for them. Part of my suggestion is that the objects that are valued in the museum have some relationship and relevance to the museum’s constituents.

Another time, during an exhibition of The Poisons Section of *The Portable Hawkers Museum at Claraplatz in Basel* (figure 6), someone came to me and said that I had no right to place my museum in this public

space, and that I was guilty of the very conceit of assuming value, relevance and working for the public good that other museums are guilty of. What made my museum any different from other museums, apart from its size? they asked. I had no answer. Like a lifesaving defibrillation, this question jolted me to the realization that parody may not be enough to counter the danger of reproduction of the hegemony of museums when trying to critique institutions from within. I have come to realise that despite how engagements such as mine enable dialogue and critique, the very idea of a museum remains imported, and even *The Portable Hawkers Museum* that is open on the street is STILL NOT universally accessible. Museums cannot escape their ideological formation and troubled histories, but they can approach them in different ways. When rethinking museums in Africa it is clear that the way forward is to show how problematic the concept of a museum is, and more than proposing alternatives like *The Portable Hawkers Museum*, we should write the word ‘museum’ under erasure. Translated from the French “sous rature” by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1976), to write “under erasure” is a philosophic writing device proposed by Heidegger and expanded upon by Derrida. Spivak (1976, xiv) explains that to write under erasure is “to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible.)” To write under erasure is to recognize that the language used to communicate is no longer adequate to communicate meaning, but that there is not yet a more suitable terminology, or a single word that could capture the true meaning of a concept. For example, the word ‘museum’ fails to adequately capture how museums were instrumental in promoting western supremacy and the colonial project.

For Derrida (1976) crossing out the word is better than creating a new word, because the act of crossing out signifies that the word and its meanings continue to be problematic, avoiding substituting one terminology for another. Merely substituting one terminology for another, as when institutions and street names are changed, is an insufficient placebo. Substitution hides the problems of the word and its meanings, producing the illusion that the issues are resolved, but rather they are



*Figure 6: Alison Kearney, The Poisons Section of The Portable Hawkers Museum: Basel, 2004. Photographic documentation of a performance at Claraplatz, Basel.*

potentially forgotten. Thus, museum gives way to **museum** to indicate that the museums as they have been conceived of should be erased, but not forgotten, so that we reconceptualise how material and immaterial culture might be preserved and presented. If they are to have a future in Africa, or anywhere for that matter, **museums** must shed their associations with mausoleums and invite dialogue with their constituents. Despite the seeming impossibility of escaping the ideological formation of museums and their colonialist legacies, through critical praxis, artists can help open the discursive spaces of art production and display and create awareness of the ideological nature of the institutions of art. In the process, artists can hold **museums** up for a particular way of looking, and in so doing work towards new **museum** futures.

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## Biographies

**Dr. Naman P. Ahuja** is a curator and Professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. His studies on Indian art have explored the aesthetics of Indian visual culture, iconography and transculturalism in antiquity, as well as the legacy of the Arts and Crafts Movement in the modern period.

**Elvira Espejo Ayca** has been the Director of the National Museum of Ethnography and Folklore (MUSEF) in La Paz., Bolivia. From 2010 to 2011 she was a contributor to the Das Potosí Prinzip exhibition at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt cultural centre in Berlin, which subsequently toured in Spain and Bolivia. In 2020, she was awarded with The Goethe Medal, an official honour of the Federal Republic of Germany.

**Andreas Beitin** studied Art History and obtained his doctoral degree in 2004, after which he worked at the ZKM | Museum of Contemporary Art in Karlsruhe, Germany. He became director of the museum in 2010. Beitin has conceived numerous internationally acclaimed exhibitions and has published scholarly texts in Germany and abroad. He has received several awards for his curatorial work. From 2016 to 2019, he was Director of the Ludwig Forum for International Art Aachen; since 2019, he has been Director of the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany.

**Johannes Beltz** is Deputy Director & Senior Curator of Indian and South East Asian Art at the Museum Rietberg, in Zurich, Switzerland. His main area of interest are the interactions of art, religion and culture in ancient as well as contemporary societies. He curated numerous exhibitions such as "Javanese Shadow Theatre: Stories about Life and the World" (2020).

**Memory Biwa** resides in Windhoek, Namibia. She is a research fellow at the University of Bayreuth, within the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence. A recipient of the 2021 DAAD Artists-in-Berlin program, she

intends to continue her research and performances with sonic archives. Biwa is a member of the Namibian National Committee on Human Remains and Heritage Objects, and on the advisory council of “Dekoloniale – Memory Culture in the City”, Berlin.

**Prof. Dr. Inés de Castro** graduated in anthropology from the University of Bonn, Germany. From 2006 to 2010 she was curator and deputy-director of the ethnographic collection at the Roemer- and Pelizaeus-Museum Hildesheim, Deutschland. Since 2010 she has been director of the Linden-Museum Stuttgart, State Museum of Anthropology, Germany, one of the important ethnographic collections of Europe. With her team she has experimented different forms of participation with communities based locally and abroad both for exhibition and research projects. The Linden-Museum is also working on new ways to deal with the colonial heritage and with the entangled history between Europe and the places of origin of our collections.

**Dr. Parul Dave-Mukherji** is professor at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. She holds a PhD from Oxford University and her publications span global art history, comparative aesthetics and contemporary Indian art. She is currently co-editing a Thames & Hudson book on 20th Century Indian Art to be published in Fall 2021.

**Leonhard Emmerling** is an art historian, writer and curator. Since 2010 he works in different capacities for the Goethe-Institut, currently (2021) as regional program director South Asia in New Delhi, India.

**Dr. Berthold Franke** studied Music, German Literature and Social Sciences. He joined the Goethe-Institut 1988 and has held posts in Warsaw, Dakar, Stockholm, Paris, Brussels and Prague. Since 2018 he has been director of the Max Mueller Bhavan in New Delhi and Regional Director of the Goethe-Institut in South Asia (India, Bangla Desh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iran). He has numerous essays and publications on cultural-political and political topics.

**Cíntia Guedes** is a professor at Universidade Federal da Bahia, Brazil. She holds a PhD from Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, focusing

on racial relations, coloniality of power and subjectivity production. She makes multidisciplinary actions in contemporary art.

**Latika Gupta** has worked as a curator at the NGMA and KHOJ International Artists' Association in Delhi, India, besides curating independent exhibitions. She has received fellowships from the Nehru Trust and India Foundation for the Arts, and was a research fellow at SOAS, London on a Charles Wallace India Trust grant (2017). From 2016-2020 she was Associate Editor at Marg Publications. She is a part of the editorial collective of <https://100histories100worlds.org/>

**Nydia Gutiérrez** has been chief curator of the Museo de Antioquia, in Medellín, Colombia, and of Museo de Bellas Artes, in Caracas, Venezuela. She is professor on curating at the MA program in museology, Universidad Nacional de Colombia; and a member of the Museal Episodes, Goethe Institut, and of the Prince Claus Fund Network Partners. She is interested in the relationships between theoretical and practical principles of architecture, urbanism, and museology to propose connections between art, museum, and communities as emancipatory and decolonizing strategies, with possible affinities between Latin America and the Global South.

**Goodman Gwasira** worked as a curator of archaeology at the National Museum of Namibia before joining the University of Namibia where he currently lectures on archaeology and heritage studies. His research interests include critical archaeologies, history of archaeology, restitution of cultural property and community participation in heritage resources management.

**Dr. Jyotindra Jain**, formerly Director, National Crafts Museum, and Professor of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India, was Visiting Professor at Harvard University, Massachusetts, USA, and Humboldt University, Berlin. A scholar of Indian art and Fellow of Asiatic Society of Bombay, Jain received the Prince Claus Award and German Cross of the Order of Merit.

**Dr Alison Kearney** is an intra-disciplinary artist and scholar working across and between art theory, art making and art education. Alison

is a senior lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. Her research questions how artists, curators and arts educators challenge museum discourses through their practices.

**Christine Litz** is an art historian and currently director of Museum für Neue Kunst, Freiburg, Germany. She specializes in modern and contemporary art and has worked for Museum Ludwig, Cologne, sculpture project Münster, and dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel. Within her work she explores the functions, responsibilities and possibilities of the museum.

**Chao Tayiana Maina** is a Kenyan digital heritage specialist and digital humanities scholar working at the intersection of culture and technology. Her work primarily focuses on the application of technology within African heritage. She is the founder of African Digital Heritage, a co-founder of the Museum of British Colonialism and a co-founder of the Open Restitution Africa project.

**Flower Manase** is a senior curator of History at the National Museum of Tanzania with a Bachelor degree in History and Archaeology. Ms. Manase is currently engaged in provenance research of colonial collections in Germany (Ethnological Museum Berlin) and Tanzania (Museum and House of Culture-Dar es Salaam) under a collaborative research project funded by Gerda Henkel Foundation.

**Tasneem Z. Mehta** is Managing Trustee and Honorary Director, Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai, India, and former Vice Chairman Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage. Mrs Mehta is an art historian, writer, curator and designer who has successfully pioneered the revival and restoration of several cultural sites in Mumbai. She is a member of the International Council of MoMA, New York and has served on several Indian museum boards.

**Dr. Christoph Menke** is professor, Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main, Department of Philosophy, Germany. His publications in English include *The Sovereignty of Art- Aesthetic Negativity after Adorno and Derrida*, 1998; *Reflections of Equality*, 2006; *Tragic Play- Tragedy. Irony and Theater from Sophocles to Beckett*, 2009; *Force- A Funda-*

mental Concept of Aesthetic Anthropology, 2012; Law and Violence-Christoph Menke in Dialogue, 2018; Critique of Rights, 2020.

**Molemo Moiloa** is based in Johannesburg, South Africa. She has worked in various capacities at the intersection of creative practice and community organizing. She currently works on notions of ungovernability, social infrastructures of cultural organizing, and relationships to nature. She is one half of the artist collaborative MADEYOULOOK and co-organiser of the Open Restitution Africa project.

**iki yos piña narváez** artist, afro caribbean, belongs to the Ayllu Collective and has participated in several exhibitions, both as a curator and an artist, most notably in: Give Us the Gold. Anti-colonial Actions, (co-curator), Matadero, 2018; and All the Tones of Rage, Museum of Contemporary Art of Castilla y León MUSAC, 2018, both in Spain. piña narváez is currently co-coordinating the Critical Studies program P.O.P.S (Programa Orientado a Prácticas Subalternas), in Madrid, Spain. piña narváez participated in the 2020 Sydney Biennale and as artist-in-residence at the 2020 Pernod Ricard Fellowship in Paris.

**Luiza Proença** is a researcher in Subjectivity Studies at PUC São Paulo, Brazil, focused on the relations between art, politics and ethics. She was a curator at the São Paulo Art Museum and at the 31st São Paulo Biennial, and editor of publications of the 9th Mercosul Biennial in Porto Alegre, among other institutions. From 2017 to 2019, she was a curatorial researcher for Bauhaus Imaginista at Sesc Pompeia, São Paulo, and Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany.

**Ciraj Rassool** is professor of History at the University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa, and directs the Remaking Societies, Remaking Persons Supranational Forum. He served on the boards of District Six Museum and Iziko Museums of South Africa and chaired the scientific committee of the International Council of African Museums (AFRICOM).

**Marcelo Rezende** is a researcher, critic and exhibition-maker. He has been co-director of the Archive der Avantgarden (AdA) in Dresden, Germany, since 2017. Previously he was director of the Museum of

Modern Art of Bahia (2012–2015), artistic director of the 3rd Bahia Biennial (2014) and was part of the curatorial group of the 28th São Paulo Biennial (2008), all in Brazil, amongst other projects and occupations around the world.

**José Eduardo Ferreira Santos e Vilma Santos** are residents of the railway suburb in Salvador, Brazil, where they are the founders and curators of the *Acervo da Laje*, a collection and cultural centre which investigates the invisible art of workers from the outskirts of Salvador. José Eduardo is an educator and holds a MA in Psychology and a PhD in Public Health from the Universidade Federal da Bahia. Vilma Santos is an educator, producer and coordinator of the educational section of the *Acervo da Laje*.

**Sundar Sarukkai** is the founder of the Barefoot Philosophers ([www.barefootphilosophers.org](http://www.barefootphilosophers.org)). He is presently a Visiting Professor at the Centre for Society and Policy, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, India. He is an advisory member of Leonardo and Marg. His work is primarily in the philosophy of the natural and social sciences.

**Shuddhabrata Sengupta** is an artist with the Raqs Media Collective.

**Avni Sethi** is an interdisciplinary practitioner working at the cross sections of culture, memory, space and the body. She conceptualised and curated the Conflictorium, Museum of Conflict and Mehnat Manzil, Museum of Work. Trained in multiple dance idioms, her performances are largely inspired by syncretic faith traditions and sites of contested narratives. She works and lives in Ahmedabad, India.

**Dr. Kavita Singh** is Professor of Art History at the School of Arts and Aesthetics of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India, where she teaches courses in the history of Indian painting, particularly the Mughal and Rajput schools, and the history and politics of museums.

**Suzana Sousa** is an independent curator, researcher and writer. She is a fellow at the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa, and also at [africaasacountry.com](http://africaasacountry.com) researching Angolan cultural policy. She is Co-curator of the exhi-

bition 'The Power of My Hands' currently at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, part of the Saison Africa 2020.

**Dr. Romila Thapar** is Professor Emerita of History at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. She has been General President of the Indian History Congress 1983, Fellow of the British Academy and the American Philosophical Society. She holds Honorary Degrees from Calcutta, Oxford and Chicago Universities. She was awarded the Kluge Prize, 2008, honouring achievement in disciplines not covered by the Nobel Prize.

**Greer Valley** is a lecturer in History of Art at the Wits School Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. She is a doctoral candidate in Art Historical Studies at the Michaelis School of Fine Art and a Doctoral Fellow at the Archive and Public Culture Initiative at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. Her current research and practice interests include curatorial interventions in museums and art institutions connected to African colonial histories. She currently serves on the board of the Africa South Arts Initiative and as a member of the Kwa-Zulu Natal Society of Arts.

**Paulina E. Varas** is a professor and associated researcher in Campus Creativo, Universidad Andrés Bello, in Chile, and member of Southern Conceptualism Network. She developed the platform CRAC Valparaíso for artistic residencies and experimental process on art and politics. She has recently published *Luz Donoso. El arte y la acción en el presente* and *Archivo CADA. Astucia práctica y potencias de lo común* (both by Ocho libros). She researches about art and politics in Chile and other contexts, in relations with the present struggles in social movements, feminism and political memories. She takes care of her son Borja and their cat Cuchita.

**Dr. Jan Völker** is currently substitute professor for audiovisual media and media philosophy at the Bauhaus University in Weimar, Germany, and associate professor at the Institute of Philosophy of the Slovenian Academy of Arts and Sciences in Ljubljana, Slovenia.





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Why museums? What for? Whoever believes they are just dusty tombs of the past needs to read this book. To think about the museum means to contemplate the consequences of globalization, the continuing presence of the colonial past in different parts of the world, and the relevance of the museum in education, cultural heritage and political and social discourse. The texts by philosophers, activists, curators and social scientists from four continents, shed light on a wide range of critical questions related to the future of the museum and the museum of the future—questions that are intertwined with how we envision our pasts, presents and futures as communities and countries.

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