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# Decolonising ethnological museums

Art as a way out of the crisis of representation?

Regina Wonisch

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Against the backdrop of the current debate revolving around the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, dealing with ethnological collections in science and society has become a controversial subject, as the history of ethnological museums is inseparably linked to Eurocentrism and colonialism. Criticism of ethnological museums is not new, but it has not yet translated into the exhibition practice accordingly - dominant narratives have consistently been reproduced. Post-colonial criticism of museums is not only levelled against the appropriation and submission of bodies and objects of other cultures, but already starts at the epistemological concepts on which the museum as an institution is founded. How can museums encounter this past? Can the transformation of a colonial institution into a space for post-colonial discourse be successful? What are the challenges at the interface of ethnological museums and art?

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## The challenge of decolonising ethnological museums?

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If you take the new buildings and new concepts as indicators, ethnological museums currently seem to be in a phase of transition given the events surrounding the Humboldt Forum. In the wake of increasing globalisation ethnological museums see an opportunity to obtain new socio-political significance as venues of a 'dialogue of cultures'. Art, in particular the cooperation with contemporary artists, is seen as a way out of the representation crisis of ethnological collections. These are supposed to breathe new life into museums by questioning and re-interpreting ethnological collections. However, the question arises under which conditions (such as interventions, Artist in Residence-programmes, Artistic Research) contemporary artists actually change, subvert or transform representations in museums.

Artistic practices can certainly be made fruitful for the work in ethnological museums, but

contemporary art is not able to solve the urgent problems of ethnological museums. The decolonisation of ethnological museums is about profound structural changes, which the museums must ultimately tackle themselves. Ethnological museums are not able to liberate themselves from their colonial entanglement. These are deeply inscribed in the scientific discipline, the history of the museum and the collections. Their only option is to face the history of violence with as much openness and self-reflection as possible.

But how could such a post-colonial ethnological museum work? The issue would not be so much the customs of other cultures, but insights into colonial power relations in the past and, in particular, perspectives on their traces in a present characterised by globalisation processes. That does not destroy the ethnological collections, but gives them a new contextualisation and identification: as exhibits of world images and power relations that are bound for renegotiation.

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## The new demand for world cultures and global art

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In the last years, there has been some movement in the landscape of ethnological museums, the most visible sign of which is the renaming of museums, according to the art historian Christian Kravagna who teaches at the *Akademie der bildenden Künste* in Vienna. The term ethnology has increasingly been removed from the museum names and has been replaced by terms such as world culture or names of researchers. This includes, for example, the Weltkulturen Museum Frankfurt, the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum – Kulturen der Welt in Cologne, the Museum Fünf Kontinente in Munich, Världskulturmuseet in Gothenburg, the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, the Weltmuseum in Vienna. In particular, the intention of renaming was to signalise a cosmopolitan spirit. However, eliminating the term ethnology also entails that the origin of collections in the context of colonialism is obscured.

There are hardly any ethnological museums that do not include the phrase “dialogue of cultures”. The knowledge of other cultures is supposed to promote mutual understanding, appreciation and tolerance. But – according to Kravagna (2015) – the aggregation of ethnological knowledge proved the exact opposite. As cosmopolitan as the poly-cultural comparison of lifestyles may appear, it does contribute to culturalism. Critical research on migration and racism deconstructed this discourse on diversity, tolerance and dialogue as a veiling of issues of power, economic and social inequalities, and forms of structural racism.

To some extent, the development of ethnological museums to world culture museums corresponds with the 'global turn' in the art world. 'Non-Western' art is being increasingly noticed in the world of art but also academia. However, the

question arises whether the current 'global art'-hype as it manifests itself in exhibitions, conferences and funding programmes is indeed a sign for the (self-induced) emancipation of the Eurocentric art world. Or is it rather an indication of the universalisation of the artistic terms that remain connected to the colonising defining power of capitalism and thus ultimately is rather a testimony of globalisation than of the global? Frequently, the term 'global art' is only used as a synonym for 'non-Western' culture.

Even if museums do paint a global picture of themselves, they have not left Eurocentrism behind. According to the art critic Hanno Rauterberg, ethnological museums or art museums would only be true 'places of the world' if they provided space for all eras, forms of culture and continents, for a wild, surprising mix and coexistence.

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## Art as a way out of the crisis of representation in museums?

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Ethnological objects have usually been qualified as artefacts or 'primitive art', irrespective of their aesthetic quality. Increasingly, selected ethnological objects are being located in artistic contexts (Louvre) and/or presented as art (*Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac* in Paris). However, regardless of which category is selected, the ethnological and also the aesthetical classification criteria originate from a Western perspective. In some languages there even are no words for art or works of art.

Another strategy consists of creating a 'dialogue' between ethnological objects and art. That usually means that works of art are added to ethnological objects, whereas the constellations are often characterised by a certain arbitrariness. It requires certain framework conditions on the

part of the museums to actually facilitate a productive interaction between science and art.

### **Art interventions**

Projects which do not only confront ethnological objects with works of art, but which consist of artists directly addressing the collections or modes of representation, are of particular interest. This does not mean that there is an epistemological superiority of artists over scientific practices; self-reflective and representation-critical approaches can also be found in ethnology. But in contrast to the field of art, processuality or interpretative openness with regard to the visual representations are encountered more rarely in the museum context, where the 'educational mandate' is often still used as an argument. But education does not (only) consist of disseminating secure knowledge, but rather of a critical approach, which is aware of its own particularity and scientific fallibility and grants enough space to the unwieldiness of the historical material.

Artistic practices have the potential to destabilise orders of knowledge and to expose the museum audience to aesthetic experiences that do not only expound the problems regarding the delineation between subject/object, human/animal, nature/culture, but also transcend these boundaries on a visual level. In principle, exhibitions as an assemblage of objects, texts, media, and images constitute an experimental arrangement 'per se'. This construction character could be brought to a head, while not intending to eliminate interferences and areas of conflict, but, on the contrary, to produce them.

Some artists – like Lisl Ponger – consciously refuse such a calling from ethnological museums, as it would constitute complicity with the 'colonial enterprise'. Indeed, it is a bizarre notion to invite, of all people, people from the global South to save colonial museums.

### **Artist in residence programmes**

Unlike interventions, *artist in residence* programmes provide more adequate conditions to deal with the museum and its collections because spending a longer period as an immediate neighbour of the neighbour grants better insights into the institution. However, a significant condition for this is that the artists have sufficient time not only to get to know the museum but also the curators. It requires a relationship of trust for artists and curators to actually embark on a frequently conflict-laden process. The effects of artist in residence programmes also depend on the 'mandate' that the museum has endowed the creators of art and culture with, and whether questioning the institution, collections or individual objects is desired at all. In return, there must be willingness on the part of the artists to engage with the collections and the expertise of the ethnologists, and not only to use the objects as a source of inspiration for their own work. If this is not the case, then the artistic interpretations are at risk of being superficial, or of becoming ahistorical elements of contemporary artistic practice.

Against this backdrop, the question arises whether *artist in residence* programmes should rather focus on the exchange of approaches, methods and practices, or on the initiation of processes instead of on the creation of a piece of work. In any case, one approach should not be pitted against the other, but instead collaborative processes between scholarly research and art should be explored.

### *Artistic research*

Artists who are familiar with the approaches of artistic research are to be preferred for the collaboration between science and art because, to some extent, the interface between science and art is pre-programmed into this approach. However, this area is only in the process of establishing itself. A distinction is being made between art which is based on (other) research, art that uses research, or its methods, for itself, and art whose products are research.

However, in the discourse between ethnology and art, this approach might, in particular, stand the test. The strength of art lies in its self-reflective potential by acting as a place of ceaseless challenges on the basis of its own principles or discourses. But ethnology also has a long tradition of self-reflectively dealing with text-based forms of representation in science and developing new, artistic forms of expression, such as the *writing culture* debate of the 1980s. These approaches would have to be applied to the specific setting of museums and collections, and to be further developed. The fictive element of art may be of advantage when dealing with other cultures, as in many cases it is simpler to approach complex, non-familiar life realities by way of fictionalisation rather than by way of supposedly authentic documentation. Additionally, scientific representations in museums that argue with the power of the factual also contain fictionalisation - however, without identifying it as such. By using symbolisation, irritations or other aesthetic practices, new entries to the material culture of the 'other' could be created that do not rely so much on cultivating proximity but rather on the experience of the other and on insecurity. The great challenge, however, for artists and scholars consists of translating the post-colonial criticism of representation and institutions into an aesthetical practice.

A museum laboratory, in which different approaches regarding the contents and presentation forms in museums can initially be explored in a 'safe' space, seems to be a particularly promising concept for ethnological museums, which, due to their colonial entanglement and scientific conceptions, need to be radically rethought. The fact that the experiences are not aimed at objectives and can be performed without any pressure success is a significant point. The projects must not be seen as harmless playing fields. If they are taken seriously as a room for opportunity then they cannot be spaces without tension.

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### **Post-colonial science and art**

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The art scene as well as ethnology is to be questioned from a post-colonial perspective, as modern science and art originate from similar 19th-century schools of thought. This includes a critical reflection of the worldwide conditions of producing art, its distribution and reception. Given the Western-dominated art canon, it is also upon museums of modern and contemporary art to rethink collections, research and exhibitions from a global perspective. In contrast to the art movements that demarcate themselves with their self-referentiality - masked as universalism - claiming autonomy and independence from other cultural and social fields, post-colonial artists understand themselves as deeply anchored in history, politics and economy, and contextualise their own work in current processes of globalisation.

Interfaces between ethnological museums and artists can become particularly popular when science and art encounter each other under different circumstances, with other means and a different language, but in the same frame of mind. In this case, it may be advantageous that post-colonial theory formation is criticised as

relatively undefined, as it may open up the necessary leeway for science and art.

The perception of what post-colonialism or post-colonial means differs and is subject to ongoing discourse. In any case, the prefix 'post' does not only signify a temporal 'afterwards' with regard to colonialism, according to Kravagna (2013), but rather an oppositional force with the aim of overcoming colonial relations of power. Political independence of former colonies is not the end of the process of decolonialisation, as the imperial power relations radiate into the neo-colonial dependence, marginalisation and exploitation structures of the present. Pursuing the traces and after-effects of colonialism, is often viewed as a post-colonial approach. This does happen to be a significant aspect, which, however, according to post-colonial theoreticians, falls too short.

Not every exhibition or work of art that addresses certain aspects of colonialism can be described as post-colonial. An exhibition, as Kravagna states, can be considered post-colonial if its conception takes the power relations of colonialism as the starting point for a critical perspective on power relations and oppressive mechanisms, which are based on an explicit or implicit notion of cultural or biological differences and hierarchies. Conversely, exhibitions can also have a post-colonial character if they do not address historical colonialism, but, for example, its concomitant orders of knowledge. However, a fundamental problem consists of the circumstance that post-colonial theories encompass a set of demanding prerequisites, which means that they are established in Western universities, but not necessarily established within the population groups that they address.

Colonialism and neo-colonialism as well as the struggle against oppression, exploitation and racism are more current topics of contemporary

art than subjects addressed in ethnological museums. However, the question arises why these exhibitions usually occur in the context of art and not in an ethnological museum. Is this connected to the fact that the ethnological museum as such has less prestige compared to the realm of art? Or, is there a risk that dealing with colonialism critically would be co-opted in an ethnological context? But the art discourses often do not arrive in ethnological museums, even if they do increasingly include contemporary art in their presentations. Rather, they seem to occur as parallel developments. Additionally, the audience of the art scene often does not correspond with that of ethnological museums. However, it is decisive that post-colonial criticism directed at museums does not remain an elitist discourse, but manages to develop as broad an appeal as possible. The aim would be a hybrid, interdisciplinary practice of curatorship between ethnology and art (history), which in the best case could entail shifting and expanding the horizon for both sides.

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### **Cooperation with the societies of origin**

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However, criticism of representation can only be the beginning; it must find its continuation in the criticism of the institution. It is not only about the decolonialisation of the perspective, but also of the structures. In particular, this includes the issue that those speaking also have the power of definition in the museum. To which extent can the colonised subject empower itself through self-representation to return the gaze of the coloniser?

Since the power of interpretation over the ethnological collections had almost exclusively been with Western scholars until far into the 20th century, many ethnological museums see that they themselves are under the obligation to enter into a dialogue with the societies of origin. Given the power-political inequalities, the question



arises whether, in particular, an equal dialogue is possible at all under these conditions?

As the ethnological collections were often badly documented when they were acquired, the museum curators had to rely in many cases on the information provided from the societies of origin. In many cases, however, not only the objects, but also the traditional knowledge got lost in the societies of origin so that conversely they would also like to resort to the accumulated knowledge of the museums. In each case the ethnological museums are per se trans-cultural institutions so that the cooperation with the societies and countries of origin is really an obvious methodological standard. With this background, propagating the cooperation projects can easily become a patronising gesture, in particular with the background that museums and universities of the global South have for a long time been addressing the colonial heritage 'of their own accord'.

As important as cooperation projects with the societies of origin are, colonial power relations are once again reproduced by the Western museums determining the rules of cooperation. The unequal distribution of resources can often not be resolved in these forms of cooperation, but it is also about the readiness to engage in a joint process. For this interaction to occur 'on an equal footing', the Western institutions must give up their curatorial privileges, otherwise the cooperation projects will reflect the economic and geopolitical dominance of the West. For the museum expert Joachim Baur, the museum can only become a 'contact zone' if it comprehensively and on a long-term basis includes those whose culture and history it collects and exhibits into its operations. The aim in this context must be to enter into an open and reciprocal relationship with the affected parties without negating the asymmetries of resources and social means in

this relationship. However, there are also tendencies in the museum discourse to adopt the term and the idea of a 'contact zone' as a mere phrase and to remove the conflicts associated with the concept (Kravagna 2015). However, they are avoidable if one allows that one's own mentality is questioned and opens up to other epistemologies, as the resonance rooms in between are inevitably loaded with dissonance. In this context, an important point is less to 'give' a voice to those represented in the interaction, but to hear and to recognise their voices.

Provenance research is an opportunity to enter into contact with the 'societies of origin'. Often it is less about returning the objects, but about dealing with the colonial circumstances under which the collections came into existence. The collection-related scholarly research usually falls aside as the capacities of the museums are exhausted with their exhibition and communication work.

### **Who is legitimised to speak?**

Often the question is asked who the 'legitimate' representatives are and who should participate in the cooperation projects. Any person who is authorised to tell the story of a social group, a city or a country is always part of a social negotiating process, and thus not least a question of power. Thus, in Germany criticism of the lack of efforts to deal with the colonial past is being advanced not least by various groups of civil society (e.g. Berlin Postkolonial). Closer cooperation with these organisations is hence also recommendable as NGOs transport the discourse into a wider public, beyond the typical museum audience. Here, as well as there, it makes sense to include, where possible, different social institutions and social groups in the process, i.e. museums, universities and other educational institutions, creators of art and culture, and also NGOs and activists.

However, maybe new forms of interaction must also be developed for the cooperation and co-production projects with the societies of origin. This entails that post-colonial exhibition strategies are often associated with post-representative exhibition formats: Exhibitions are no longer places where representative objects are put on show, but rather rooms where new encounters and discourses become possible because not all cultures cultivate the same approach to material culture as Western societies. Therefore, the classic representation forms of exhibitions may not always be the most adequate form of visualisation in cooperation projects with 'non-Western' societies. In cooperation projects the task is to assemble things and procedures, which will maintain their heterogeneity and will never form an entity, but, in the best case, a fragile, corrigible and versatile composition.

Given the complexity of the framework conditions, 'deceleration' in collaborative projects is to be advocated. Previous experiences have shown that the conversations are fragile, complicated, controversial and susceptible to misunderstanding. Therefore, a product, a well-made exhibition, presentation or event should not necessarily be the primary focus. Instead, the protagonists should take the time to ensure and intensify the continuity of the talks, while observing if and which shared interests develop. Contemporary artists could acquire a particular significance in these processes of cooperation and co-production, which often involve tensions. Because in the field of art, unlike in science, it is less about right or wrong and processes are often more important than the product.

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## Post-colonial museums as negotiation places of globalised societies

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If ethnological museums do not want to become relics of colonial and neo-colonial orders, they have to confront and negotiate their colonial history and the history of how the collections came into existence and the academic paradigms on which they rest. Possibly, the actual opportunity of the Humboldt Forum consists of the fact that, compared to other newly conceived ethnological museums, it is particularly controversial, and has thus given rise to a broad public debate, which is not to be pacified but to be perpetuated.

Which function could ethnological museums assume in an increasingly globalised society? The focus should not be so much on the customs of other cultures, but on insights into colonial power relations in the past and, in particular, perspectives on their traces in a present characterised by neo-colonial societal orders. Thus, not the difference between Europe and the 'rest of the world', but the intertwined history would lie at the centre of interest. The advantage of ethnological museums would consist of the fact that they can regard topics such as racism, displacement, migration and refugee movements, which result from economic, social and political imbalances of the world regions, from a historic and from a global perspective.

However, this also means that ethnological museums must not statically remain at their colonial collections, but must also take sight on the developments of the societies of origin after the end of colonial rule. Decolonising ethnological collections and museums thus implies questioning the disciplinary boundaries between ethnology, cultural history, history and art, and the corresponding orders of knowledge. The reason for this is that beyond the colonial project, as Kravagna (2015) says, it does not make any sense



to classify humans according to 'ethnicity' and culture. The task at hand is to approximate each social constellation with equal consideration of the political, economic, social and cultural circumstances from a historical and contemporary perspective.

Similarly, this applies to the world of art. On the quest for a pluralised globality, it is essential for the protagonists of the art world to question their production conditions with regard to the economic and geo-political relations of dependence as well as different cultural traditions and conditions of reception. The particular freedom of art does open a larger playing field for 'wild thinking', but the radical subjectivity which it claims for itself can also reduce its socio-political effectiveness. Instead of establishing a new pattern of dominance in the global gesture of *global art*, talking about the global in art not only poses challenges to the knowledge of the distant, but also to the own practice of the globality of proximity.

Under the condition of jointly approaching the increasingly globalised living conditions and the reflection on the own institutional involvement, diverse interfaces between ethnological museums and art would open. In this way, Kravagna (2015) states, maybe the transformation from a colonial institution into a room for post-colonial discourse can succeed through discussion about historical and contemporary practices of exploitation, marginalisation and appropriation. This seems even more important considering that colonialism has been mostly invisible in the German-speaking world. How such a post-colonial museum could look like cannot be designed a priori. It is not without reason that Kravagna speaks of the 'impossible colonial museum'. He defines it as impossible because its institutionalisation would block the transformative powers of its ideas.

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