

WALKING THROUGH

Thoughts on the metabolic practice of the museum¹

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A few years back, I walked through as many ethnographic museums in Western Europe as I could. I wanted to witness their status in contemporary civil society, understand the contradictions evoked by their outdated modes of display, and learn more about the power structures behind the inordinate mass of artefacts held under lock and key.

I began by focussing on the immediate constituents of the museum experience. I sought to match the body of the visitor with the corpus of the collection and the broader metabolism of the museum. I wondered, in what manner do members of the public move through an exhibition space? For how long do they engage with the displayed artefacts? What is the relationship between seeing, feeling and thinking? Are they provided with a chair purposefully placed in front of a vitrine to enable lengthier contemplation? Or do they stand upright as if facing a screen, ready to swipe on, and rarely moving up close or bending down to peer at the underside of an exhibit?

The museum as a spatial configuration of inhabited meanings adapts only very gradually to change. Timing is a curatorial unit, place is clearly demarcated, artworks are hung according to norms, lighting and air humidity re coordinated with conservation requirements, and the visitor readily accepts this monitoring environment, which anchors and regulates their perception. If a video is projected, there may be the opportunity to lie on a carpeted floor, slump on a mattress or find a stool to sit on. Hours can be spent in this way because new media are recognized as requiring a longer period of intake than a painting, photograph, sculpture, or set of artefacts. Robert Harbison noted in 1977, at a time when video works began entering the museum, that the “immersion in the object that stops time is achieved by treating it as an existence to be lived in rather than something to be stopped in front of or looked at, and one can almost tell from people’s movements whether they have entered a painting or are only staring at it.”²

The bias against the body of the museum spectator dates back to the European Renaissance when architects and designers saw the gallery as a “fixed theater of spectatorship” intended “to regulate strictly the viewer’s range of motion and

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² Robert Harbison, *Eccentric spaces*, MIT Press (1977), 2000:147

object of focus.”³ As museum spaces gradually evolved over the course of the eighteenth century from private house museums into public institutions, those “unruly social bodies” who once engaged in “flirting, playing, eating, drinking, talking, laughing, and napping” on ottomans, benches, or at tables, were gradually removed.⁴ By the early twentieth century, the curatorial trope has become one of “disembodied opticality”, whereby seating no longer features beyond a short stop-off point along the scenographic route through the museum to ease the “aesthetic headache” (Fuss and Saunders). Indeed, with the ensuing advent of the white cube environment, the fear of a “re-embodiment of the spectator” works to rid rooms entirely of any means of repose or study, leaving only banal exit signs to indicate the “intrusive” presence of human biology.⁵ As Fuss and Sanders explain, “art’s visual consumption owes much to the flow-management philosophy of department stores, which rarely provides seating in the main shopping areas. A seated patron, after all, is not likely to be a consuming patron; consumer culture requires bodies on the move, not bodies in repose. Simply put, the bench is anathema to the capitalist space of the modern museum.”⁶ Interestingly, there is remarkably little literature on the relationship between exhibitions and human bodies.

In the twenty-first century, the museum – now hygienist - is obsessed with its own dirty data, cleansing and disinfecting its contaminated past, in particular the bloody residuals attached to the traumatic memories of slavery, colonialism, and the Holocaust embodied in its collection with their absent proof of legitimate provenance. Collections become the toxic witnesses to genocidal practices.⁷ Indeed, narratives in museum ethnology retain master-slave terminologies that concur with the language of seclusion, preservation and control, such as the keeper, the custodian and the conservator. Held in inaccessible crypts, belongings acquired, looted, or wrenched away in the name of science, trade, or diplomatic exchange are sedated and safeguarded through their juridical inscription within the annals of an other’s institution. In the never-ending ethnographic present (James Clifford), anthropologists then and now continue to reflect the image of the slave onto their interlocutors from other cultures, erasing the individual identities of the artists, designers, and engineers whose works they acquire and loot. They have propelled anonymity onto what they collected in the name of ethnos. We are now faced with the “incalculability” (Mbembe) of the act of restitution. Some artefacts have been lost, have moved location, in short as Mbembe concludes restitution is “beyond quantification” and this phenomenon or state of play has to be recognized.

Ann L. Stoler states that “colonial presence” is articulated through a “political grammar” that “occludes (...) hides and conceals, creates blockage, and closes off”.⁸ To be clear about this: there are no named artists, designers or producers of

³ Diana Fuss and Joel Sanders, “An Aesthetic Headache: Notes from the Museum Bench”. In “Interiors” edited by Johanna Burton, Lynne Cooke, and Josiah McElheny. Sternberg Press, 2012:65

⁴ Fuss and Sanders 2011:69-70

⁵ Ibid, 2012:72

⁶ Ibid, 2012:75

⁷ Ciraj Rassool aptly points out that ethnographic collections are “genocidal collections” (conversation with the author, January 2019).

⁸ Ann L. Stoler, *ibid.*, 2016:9

so-called ethnographic artefacts in European collections. Controversially, one could begin to see in this an anti-colonial counterstrategy of intentionality or what I will call not “name undocumented” but “authorship withholding” – not authorship withheld, i.e., in a past modus, but the withholding as an ongoing tension, a self-willed retention, coupled with and motored by Eurocentric presuppositions of the quality of museums in former colonies. This is a conceptual and political issue that causes trouble for restitution and provenance studies – in themselves part of the philology of anthropological genealogical thinking. Today the absence of the name of the artist, be it violently excluded or intentionally withheld, throws turmoil into claims of ownership, future patenting, and other forms of capitalization in art that have to be shared.

To remediate the ethno-colonial museum requires a synesthetic process that engages not only with conditions of institutional blindness but equally with the architectonic structures through which human beings are engaged in acts of sentient cognition with materialized histories from the past. The ethnographic museum adapts quasi-automatically to its juridical and administrative features, economic imperatives, and performative articulation like a breathing, digesting, expelling and restituting morphology of human interaction. The question is how to ascertain whether the ergonomic engineering of the human body in the parkour of the museum’s architecture, actually affects the scope and scale of hermeneutic unfolding? In 1992, whilst he was president of ICOM, the former president of Mali, Alpha Oumar Konaré, valiantly suggested that all museums in Africa be “killed”, in order for a new approach to culture and heritage to flourish.⁹ This was said against a background of colonial museums promoting their own power structures (South Africa 1825-1892: 6 museums; Zimbabwe: 1900: 2 museums, Namibia, etc...) So the question becomes: can one ever succeed in revalidating an institution that has colluded with the violence of colonialism, for example, by re-evaluating former ethnographic collections, and insisting on their access and visibility, in order to develop as Mbembe rightly noted at the MoMA conference, “different modes of measuring, of inhabiting, and of sharing the planet.” Because, as he suggests, the future of life and the future of art are more than ever intertwined.¹⁰ The decolonial process in art history today cannot be engineered without full access to these disenfranchised objects sequestered and fetishized by museum anthropology. Isolated, they have no author that has been identified, no attributed maker other than through the nomos of the grouping, caste, tribe, or nation of people, recorded and confirmed by the ethnographer, and to which they are designated to belong. Their intellectual property rights are obfuscated and even denied.

Museum collections are idiosyncratic composites. They reflect the egos of scientists and historians, the foibles of curators and artists, and the political

⁹ Alpha Oumar Konaré, former president of Mali, and president of ICOM stated, “that it is about time that we questioned the fundamental basis of the situation and ‘killed’ – I repeat killed – the Western model of the museum in Africa in order for new methods for the conservation and promotion of our heritage to flourish.” (Konaré, Message from the President of ICOM, 1992).

¹⁰ Achille Mbembe closing keynote speech at the MoMA conference, “The multiplication of perspectives”, Day 3, Sunday, April 28th 2019.

desires of museum directors to compete for new gifts and rare acquisitions. In contrast, museum or university research collections are transitory, named only in relation to an inquiry. Lacking in recorded authorship, they remain outside of the art market and are assembled because the paradigm of the moment suggests that we shall learn something from them. As constellations of material artefacts or archival documents, we rely on their ability to support teaching and ignite further research at specific moments in time. However, this value is quickly superseded by any results they generate, as well as parallel transformations in the arts and sciences that may contribute to qualifying their ongoing validity. If reanimated through contemporary heteroclite assemblages that deconstruct their initial, source-centric classifications, they can infer alternative narratives and interpretations that both collide and collude with one another, as if their reappraisal had the potential to “squat” or “spam” the canon. As exercises in visual thinking, such collections can play a generative role in transdisciplinary education and knowledge production. Their remediation is exemplified most blatantly by the weight and burden of ethnographic collections. Remediation encourages conceptual liminality across modes of representation from science to art, from paideia to poesis, such that to hoard them is to handicap their energy as “epistemic objects” (Rheinberger) able to weave new nodes of contact into the texture of human relations.¹¹

Could such charged collections, effectively booty from the grey zone of scientific anthropology, become the focus for a new space of “critical resistance” (Derrida)?¹² The tightly coordinated environment of the exhibition actually works to tame the tension inherent in these sealed off storage spaces, as if the curator was dealing with a feral, uncontrollable energy yet to be exploited. Nevertheless, these holdings can be read as multiplex organizations of material ingenuity or stored code. For Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, “these objects are also the bearers of a reserve of the imagination as well as the material manifestation of forms of knowledge [savoirs]. Fishing nets that encode algorithms from fractals to anthropomorphic statues in passing by amulet-filled vests: the work of decoding the various forms of knowledge they conceal as well as the comprehension of the epistemes that have produced them still remains largely a work to be done. (...) It is indeed a question of re-activating a concealed memory...”¹³

Restitution has become both the central bone of contention and the most effective commodity to characterize the future of ethnological museums. Each of these maculate museums seeks the stamp of approval that comes with outing one’s colonial collections by admitting to the blatant absence of solid written and

¹¹ “an epistemic object: a knowledge generator in one way or the other”, Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, speaking at “100 Years from Now: The Opening” at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 30th September 2015, <https://185.203.112.46/talks/keynote-eigenzeit-revisited>

¹² Jacques Derrida, “The future of the profession or the university without condition (thanks to the “Humanities,” what could take place tomorrow), (his italics), chapter 1, p. 24-26. “For this implies, the right to do it performatively, that is, by producing events, for example by writing, and by giving rise to singular oeuvres (which up until now has been the purview of neither the classical nor the modern Humanities).” p. 26

¹³ Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, “The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics”, November 2018:42-47

photographic documentation. As a result of public lobbying and academic concern, and just as a generation of custodians is about to enter retirement, museum anthropology is experiencing a renaissance. The irony is that this renewed verve goes back to the source in order to recreate missing pieces of information omitted at the time of acquisition. All this is performed under the guise of object biographies and provenance studies. Arguments for and against restitution abound, but while these initiatives are addressed, ways of working with these vast collections retained in the vaults of museums in Europe need to be worked on as well.

How can one engage in a revision of these collections in the 21st century?¹⁴ Why do these so-called ethnographic collections remain shrouded in non-visibility? What is stopping former European colonisers from providing space and access for students and researchers from the world's many cultures including indigenous producers, to study their heritage? What is the hurdle that blocks this process? Conservation? Toxicity? A deep-seated notion of ownership? Should legal leverage for rights of access be left to the unwieldy politics of repatriation and the underrepresented efforts of indigenous communities? When will architects consider the challenge of transforming repositories from nothing short of object-prisons to new spatial environments for experimental inquiry, for creating what I would like to name: 'museum-universities'? This hybrid proto-institution would make university level inquiry flow into former ethnographic collections, basing all new research on the potentiality created by constellations and assemblages of artefacts, documents and photographic archives.

Today, there is growing recognition of the value of subjective historiographies drafted by artists on the basis of contested archives and collections. Whether this takes place in South-east Asia, on the African continent, or in Belgium, the engagement of artists demonstrates the desire to define a new malleable, heuristic space able to draw together different faculties, methodologies, and shifting social contexts into the museum of the twenty-first century. It indicates that an intersection between museum and university might help in the remediation of colonial collections thereby activating new forms of experimental visual inquiry? "Where do we land today?", asks Bruno Latour.¹⁵ Is this common space a local context, the land, the soil, ethnos or a singular, monocultural plantation once again, or do we need to work toward a multiplicity of critical zones and common places, that take into account the plurality of organisms, of living beings, of various cultures and existences? If the museum is to provide artworks with the oxygen necessary for their renewed emission and reception, it needs to take on the complexities of cognitive and emotional responses generated within its walls, opening up histories and their complaints to metabolic operations. To identify the "somato-political" (Preciado) dimensions of the museum leads back to the corpus of the archive and its collection, those organs that generate excessive structures of containment built on that which Ann L. Stoler succinctly defines as "imperial duress" that is, "a pressure exerted, a troubled condition borne in the body, a force exercised on muscles and mind."¹⁶

¹⁴ See Clémentine Deliss in "Hello World. Revising a Collection", National Galerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, May-August 2018, published by

¹⁵ Bruno Latour, "Où atterrir ? Comment s'orienter en politique ?", La Découverte, 2017

¹⁶ Ann L. Stoler, "Duress. Imperial durabilities in our times", Duke 2016:7

Within the space of the last six months, the question of sequestered artefacts held in storage in former ethnographic museums in Europe has been debated in state sessions, in academia, through art exhibitions, via the medium of artworks, in the international press, but also in an increasingly colloquial, conversational manner. The majority of people one speaks to have a sense that something is being withheld and that there exist thorny queries and theories around these collections and their possession. The metabolic has become more decisive in its metaphorical and even paradigmatic inference. The organs of matter be they constituted by fossils and bones or formulated from raw elements such ivory, wood, or bronze are interchangeable. The museological morgue confines the corpus and its meanings whatever their materiality by hindering access, preventing circulation and moreover, stymying the process of reevaluation.

So that what is at state today is the sense of a “vital relationship” (Adorno), that brings new understandings of cultural infrastructure to the museum. How to conceive of the conjunction of formalized knowledge production in exhibitions with free-style educational methods, which take over the normative architecture of a museum and initiate an auto-curatorial mode on the part of the visitor? What forms of temporary occupation and non-capitalized activity are possible in the museum of the twenty-first century? Could new formulations of higher education extend more aggressively across the museum, the art school and the university? To articulate the complexity of the museum through its collections requires a restive curatorial methodology that tests out the effects of a clash between different positions, be they based on aesthetic, art critical, cultural, historical, or scientific propositions. One approach to this decolonial dialogue is through experimental exercises initiated between artworks with recognised authorship and un-documented artefacts, both subjected to processes of allocation, classification, and marketability.

The museum-university banks on the unmonetized research collection of past and present, implementing the traction generated by restitution politics to form new epistemological alliances that contradict and aggravate the normativity of inherited 19th century genealogies. This differentiated use of the museum is an appropriation – even a usurpation – of its current condition within the civic environment. In this sense, the museum-university, which I propose as an extension of the post-ethnographic museum, is a hybrid venue based on a new architectonic metabolism that includes the necessary technical configurations for transdisciplinary inquiry. Today a legal argument to enable rights of access to these vast “ethnographic” collections for researchers of all nations, cultures and schools of thought urgently needs to be developed. Only rights of access can generate a museum of the commons and with it, an equitable reassessment of colonial collections whilst they are stored in Europe. “New institutions,” wrote Ivan Illich in 1970, “should be channels to which the learner would have access without credentials or pedigrees – public spaces in which peers and elders outside of his (sic) immediate horizon would become available.”¹⁷ Like Illich, Joseph Beuys also referred to the museum as needing a department of objects,

¹⁷ Ivan Illich, “Deschooling Society”, 1970

which like a university would generate a “permanent conference on cultural issues”.¹⁸

If the museum is an unfinished enterprise (Glissant), initially constituted by European imperialist representation, then the ultimate vector today needs to be the human being in an emancipatory and ecological dialogue with the existence of everything that the museum and its collections provide and evoke: a museum without condition, to paraphrase Jacques Derrida’s university without condition. Such an open, untethered location with no vantage points or attempts to direct the mind towards the confines of one experience or another would be a field, an expanse, an agronomy where every visitor would farm modest polycultural meanings from unmastered works, slowly apprehending the metabolics of the museum as a body.

At the forthcoming Biennial of Graphic Arts curated by Slavs and Tatars, I shall be testing out the Museum-University with a group of students from art research, product and communications design and curating that I have been teaching for the last six months at the HfG in Karlsruhe. Over 7 days in late July, the “Metabolic Museum-University” (MM-U) will squat exhibition spaces in Ljubljana transforming the presentations of the Biennial into an unusual and ironic clash between a museum, a university, and a body. Like a benign tumour, the MM-U shall foster conversations between artworks altering the framework encountered by the public and dislodging expectations through simple gestures that encourage reflection and repose. The vacant space that epitomizes the central area in a painting show, or the flows between sculptural elements in the classic modernist gallery, shall be occupied by visual interlocutors and incongruous objects (Valéry).¹⁹ Furniture will extend beyond the normative vitrine or the solitary bench offering visitors to the Biennial the chance to sit down, read, listen and watch stimuli lectures, engage in informal conversations, or take part in experiments and rehearsals. Folding chairs will have their own tongue-table, retina-light, and mini-beamer enabling participants to project images and information into the gaps between exhibits. Each day, the MM-U will be based at another venue of the Biennial where it will focus on a different organ of the human body.

Organs of the Week

Day 1: Lungday (performance)

Day 2: Tongueday (speech and translation) Day 3: Eyeday (visual thinking)

Day 4: Brainday (humour and satire)

Day 5: Skinday (technofossils)

Day 6: Liverday (detox)

Day 7: Heartday (trust and alliances)

The MM-U will be open to all and every visitor will have to option to become a student, stressing the freedom to learn in different ways. The configuration of all these elements will help to transform how we respond to exhibition and museum

¹⁸ Joseph Beuys, Frans Haks ‘Das Museum’, 1975, FIU Verlag, 1993

¹⁹ Paul Valéry, “Eupalinos”, 1921:52-55

collections in relation to our existences, developing the museum from a space of controlled consumption into a polycultural co-working space.