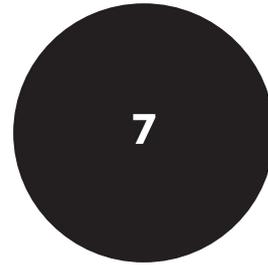




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Postcolonial Museum Laboratory

Clémentine Deliss in conversation with Joanna Sokołowska

Joanna Sokołowska: [The Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt](#), like many other ethnographical museums, could be viewed as a monument to colonial violence and the accumulation of material and symbolic wealth – the expropriation of resources and artifacts from areas and cultures conquered or dispossessed by the West.¹ If I understand correctly, your goal as the museum director is to critically examine the colonial legacy of ethnographic museums, which in turn involves the reactivation and decolonization of ethnographic objects and archives. Could you say something about the context of your work?



Line-up of objects collected on the Sepik Expedition. Neckermann House, Danziger Platz, Ostbahnhof, Frankfurt am Main. Photo: Gisela Simrock, 1961. [Weltkulturen Image Archive](#)

Clémentine Deliss: In Germany there is the largest number of ethnographic museums in the world today. Apart from the major museums in Hamburg, Munich, Leipzig, Dresden and Berlin, there are at least ten further smaller museums and ethnographic departments. I think all these museums need to rethink, rework and decolonize their institutional situation, and in so doing – reactivate their collections. When I took on the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt in 2010, I was surprised to see that what I had expected – a kind of a decolonization process or reassessment of ethnographic museums in Germany – actually wasn't taking place in such an active way. The colonial legacy has not been made the subject of public debate, in the same way as, say, the Holocaust has. That means that even if there is a major discussion around the Humboldt Forum in Berlin (which will bring together the collections of the Ethnological Museum in Dahlem, The Museum of Asian Art in Berlin and the Humboldt University), the discussions on how to construct a post-colonial museum with these collections are not very advanced. Post-colonial

debate in Germany may be advanced in other ways, but not in relation to collections themselves or to the bulk of the five million or more objects stored in ethnographic museums. Furthermore, these collections are not fully recognized for what they are - testimonies and material realities of world histories and world art histories. The collections constitute a unique material legacy from a pre-colonial and a colonial period which has not been included in the narratives of Western historical museums or the narratives of great art collections. These artifacts from around the world could become the point of departure for a new inter-disciplinary development, one that would engage not only history and anthropology, but also post-colonial studies, and questions of materiality. This would allow for the formation of a new type of global art history.

I consider the ethnographic museum a highly contentious monument. It is a controversial museum: on the one hand the collection is inherently part of German history, yet it doesn't actually belong to Germany. It's merely taken care of by the museum. The question is then, how can this collection be placed in the forefront of new debates about the post-colonial condition today?

This is why I took on this role for the museum. I saw it as the opportunity to create a new paradigm, one that would be collection-centered. It would work from the objects outwards to develop new methods, new organizing principles, new politicized understandings of the way people live in or conceptualize the world. To begin with, I had to reactivate the dialogue - one that already existed in the Frankfurt museum - about the relationship between contemporary artistic practice and anthropology.

When you speak about a monument to colonial violence, I would argue that one major dimension of this monument is the volume, the bulk, the sheer physical presence of all these things- stored in highly specialized and hermetic reserves, in depots. If you were to try to repatriate this huge bulk of objects, it would take a long, long time. So the deconstruction of this monument to colonial violence has



Left: Man and woman with face painting, possibly witchdoctors. Former Cape Province, South Africa. Photographer unknown, 1930. Central Province Archive of the Pallottines, Limburg. Weltkulturen Museum. Right: CASSETTEPLAYA: Digital print silk, melton wool/digital print cotton, screen printed tee, metallic leather. Carni Cannibal Palace A/W 2011/12. Photo: Alis Pelleschi

to happen in my opinion along a number of different routes. The route that I have chosen to develop is one based on external impulses, that makes the claim that the ethnographic museum cannot heal the problems that it faces only from within. The expertise of museum anthropology and anthropology as a discipline is not sufficient to remediate the situation in the ethnographic museum in 2014.

JS: In order to introduce these 'external impulses,' you established the "Weltkulturen Labor" residency program. You invited artists, designers, writers, lawyers and curators to work closely with the collection and in this sense to do 'fieldwork in the museum.' In this way you reversed the traditional direction of anthropological expeditions to distant countries.

CD: The collection consists of approximately 70 000 objects, 120 000 photographs and films and 50 000 books. For me, it is out of the question to collect further ethnographica, to go on expeditions to acquire more or bid for further pieces on the tribal art market. In the 1960s, the Frankfurt museum still went out and collected thousands of objects from cultures as part of so-called 'salvage anthropology.' That legitimated collecting on a massive scale. But the idea of a collecting expedition today is impossible. So we produce a new collection through the work in our laboratory and don't acquire any ethnographical objects. We are often given donations, but sometimes we also refuse them.

When I started working in the museum, I wanted to initiate a paradigm shift that would be collection-centered. It would require working on the objects in the museum itself and reframing, rethinking and reinterpreting them. To do this we would need a location, a venue that would be neither an exhibition space nor a storage space where everything is preserved and conserved along regional divisions: South-East Asia, Americas, Africa and Oceania. So the Weltkulturen Labor is the third location where objects from different departments can be brought together for research, where new investigations and intimate engagement with these artifacts is possible. It is located in the same building where our guest residents live and have studios. This all means that Otherness is produced and defined within the museum itself, making it possible to experiment and develop new



Exhibition View, Headdress and Photographs, TRADING STYLE – im Dialog, Weltkulturen Museum 2012. Exhibition Design: Mathis Esterhazy, bausprache Wien. Photo: Wolfgang Günzel

interpretations of the objects.

JS: In your work you often advocate experimental inquiry and research as a major task of the museum. Drawing on Carl Einstein's ideas on research collections, you call this model a 'dynamic school' or an 'interdisciplinary museum university.' How do you understand and use these concepts in the Weltkulturen Museum?

CD: In the 1920s, Carl Einstein described a relationship between permanent collections and research collections. He claimed that for a museum to be intellectually vigorous, there has to be movement between the exhibition of objects over longer periods of time and the investigations that are behind the scenes - the backstage where research takes place. Otherwise, he says, you end up putting a bell jar onto history; you make it stagnant, you obfuscate the dynamism of the way that ideas and the history of ideas are produced. The research collection is always dependent on the times of the inquiry with which it's connected. The second point about research collections is that they operate outside of the art market. If the invited artist - for example Antje Majewski or Marc Camille Chaimowicz - produces a work in the museum in relation to our collection, they are also leave behind a prototype. Together with other historical artifacts, this prototype contributes to a new research collection. It is not sold or traded anymore. The objects that the artists give to the museum are uniquely evaluated in relation to the past collection - outside of the artist's market evaluation.

I think this collection has the energy and the capital to bring together a new kind of competence that will reflect the hybrid disciplines that are being developed in many parts of the world today: curatorial studies, post-colonial studies, cultural studies. New forms of art history, are, I believe, begging for new foundations. And the foundation is contained within this mass of global objects of ethnographica waiting to be reformulated. In this sense, I can see that what we're doing at Weltkulturen Museum could be the seed of what I would call a 'museum university'. It takes as its cue the remediation and reactivation of this enormous body of objects that belong both to the world and to the specific source communities from which they were



Exhibition View, *CassettePlaya, TRADING STYLE – Weltmode im Dialog, Weltkulturen Museum 2012.* Exhibition Design: Mathis Esterhazy, *bausprache Wien.* Photo: Wolfgang Günzel.

once taken. The 'museum university' is the idea of an emancipatory education that would be artifact-centered and would emphasize knowledge production on the scale of a university – but in the museum. It does not return to the 19th century or the 20th century model of the university-gallery in which a university has a gallery attached to it. Rather, the whole museum becomes the university. We bring the backstage and experimental investigations to the forefront to form the basis of the development of the museum. We dissolve the distinction of a permanent collection and the back storage.

JS: As I can see, you aim to intervene in the systems of classification of knowledge about objects in the museum. Do you exhibit these taxonomies as well? Can the public access them?

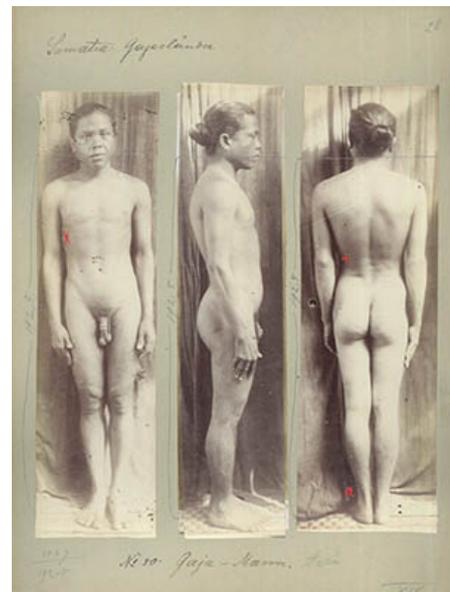
CD: We are trying to engage the public in the museum, but it's very difficult to quickly deconstruct the bulk and the weight of the taxonomies that have been produced through colonialism. It's a lengthy process. While some museums persist in explaining the meanings of ethnographic objects according to the ethnic groups and cultures that made them, my proposal is to produce alternative taxonomies and metaphors. But to do this, we have to be slightly heretical towards the discipline of anthropology itself, and we can achieve this by interpellating the collection. The exhibitions that we've done so far at the museum – "Object Atlas," "Trading Style," and "Foreign Exchange" – certainly engage audiences, but they also require audience members to suspend their expectations. And their expectations are, as very often in such museums, to be catapulted back to the exotic locations where these objects once came from. They expect to see exoticism in the display or within the descriptive wall text or label. They want the as much information as possible about any given object so they can be transported back into the enigma that once produced the relationship of that object to another culture. And I have a lot of problems with that, actually I think that reworking the ethnographic museum in terms of taxonomy and audiences leads one into a worse situation. Another option is to work more behind the scenes and to prepare the audiences gradually to understand the objects in a new way.



**Buki Akib and Object of the Collection
2012. Photo: Julia Ziegler**

JS: It seems to me that one of the most powerful and critical attempts to reveal the backstage colonial history and the primary taxonomies in the museum was the exhibition "Foreign Exchange." In this exhibition, you exhibited extremely fragile and problematic archival materials, ones exposing connections between colonialism, capitalism and ethnography. More specifically they point to relations between the accumulation, commodification and appropriation of artifacts belonging to conquered cultures that have been objectified and exploited by the colonizer. As your point of departure, you chose photographic representations of the body from the museum's archives.

CD: We knew we wanted to make a historical show about the museum, but we didn't want to do it in a linear way, nor to present the history of anthropology in Frankfurt and make a big deal about male anthropologists like Leo Frobenius. Over the last four years we have completely revitalized our image archive, discovering many materials within it. Our archivist Alice Pawlik came across two boxes of photographs of genitalia and very unpleasant images of migrant laborers that were taken by Bernhard Hagen, the founding director of the museum, on plantations in South-East Asia. As a physician, Hagen treated sick plantation workers. Suddenly, this founding director, who was always glorified as having initiated this museum, was being viewed in an unflattering light. In addition, after reading Hagen's speech at the opening of the museum in 1904 we discover that he fundamentally believed that the main purpose of this museum was to educate people in order to increase the potential for trade on a global scale. Because if you want to exploit another culture, you need to know about it, so anthropology and artifacts were seen as extremely useful tools in this process. It became clear to us, looking at the bank on the other side of the river from the museum, that there was something to be explored in the relationship between trade and anthropology. And so we began to investigate elements that might constitute a trading relationship. We discovered in our archive that Catholic missionaries had taken a lot of photographs that depicted people's genitalia, or small people – so called 'pygmies'. These



Anthropometric datasheets. Photos: Bernhard Hagen, Sumatra, Indonesia 1879-1892, Weltkulturen Image Archive

photographs were used as fundraising material for further missions abroad. So the missionaries would present their work back home in Frankfurt, showing that there was something extraordinary that needed to be corrected. They could also sell these photographs to medical companies and journals, because they provided information about other peoples and their physiognomy. These photographs are not benign; they are part of a discourse on the visual that places the ethnographic object in a particular light. So we became interested in how the human being was objectified and how the object was rendered human, how it was pumped up with qualities to make it more exciting, more visually engaging, more exotic, more unusual, etc. That is why in the exhibition we presented different staged photographs of objects from past decades up to the present day, photographs which are exaggerated by lighting and colorful backgrounds that aestheticise and decontextualize the artifacts from their former functions.

JS: In that exhibition, the images of naked migrant labourers photographed by Bernhard Hagen appear to be a testimony to the immense exploitation, institutional racism and instrumentalization of the people in question. The normative colonial gaze, to which the photographed subjects were exposed, deprived them of their dignity, presented them as commodities, tools and objects of scientific investigation. Did “Foreign Exchange” prompt any questions or discussions which established connections between colonialism and the Holocaust?

CD: Not enough. The decision to show the photographs of the migrant laborers was made in consultation with many people. When we set up a think tank to discuss the issue, we needed to know how we could exhibit these photographs. The concept of remediation is important here, because it refers to the healing procedure of a difficult situation - a remedy. But remediation also suggests that to activate the healing process, you might have recourse to different channels, different platforms, different ways of presenting and discussing this material. So, in the exhibition there are three platforms. First, you have the original material in vitrines which are quite high up, so that the height of the vitrine tells you something isn't quite right. Secondly, the photographs of these objects are shown in another room interspersed with the recent photography of



Photographs of the collection, 1960-2013, with new work by Marie Angeletti, Otobong Nkanga, Benedikte Bjerre. Photo: Wolfgang Günzel

contemporary artists. Here we projected the archival images much larger than the originals and in between them we presented artworks by Clegg & Guttmann, Pushpamala N and Clare Arni, and Rotimi Fani-Kayode. The artworks created a junction, they fractured a sequence of images picturing the dejection of migrant laborers. In between these sets of photographs you can see statements from different speakers participating in our think tanks. Viewer expectations are fragmented and he or she is confronted with this problematic photography, blown-up to a much larger scale, yet at the same time de-sensationalised through the juxtaposition with other materials and other images. The third area of remediation is a table with a laptop where you can see the whole sequence of migrant laborer photographs and hear the newly commissioned text by the Irish-Nigerian writer Gabriel Gbadamosi.

What does become clear is that Hagen's scientific view about other peoples acted as a forerunner to the national socialist model of racism and that this kind of archival photography and documentation is unfortunately very rarely seen by a large public. In Germany, the question of anthropology's contribution to colonial racial politics has not been explored enough.

JS: Working with contemporary artists on the remediation of the collection, you credit them with a particular agency which you seem not to be able to locate in other fields.

CD: I come from a contemporary art background and I studied anthropology because of contemporary artists, not because I wanted to become an anthropologist. And for 22 years I never had anything to do with anthropology. So when I took on this work for the museum, I came back to a discipline with which I have a very ambivalent relationship. The museum provides an institutional framework for me to continue the curatorial work that I do with artists anyway, which is very much about initiating new work. It's about engaging with artists in what I call 'the prelude moment', something that anticipates a future production. To invite artists to remediate the



Belgian colonial administrator compares himself to an unnamed man. Photo: Paul Schebesta. Democratic Republic of Congo, Central Africa, 1930. Anthropos Institute St. Augustin

collection involves creating a dialogue between the artist and the custodians who take objects that have been out of power, forgotten in the shadows, and bring them back into power, back into circulation. When an artist, a designer or a person with a powerful visual education walks into a store with 20 000 objects, they are likely to pick something that doesn't fall within the area of expertise of the custodian. And so they're shaking and stirring up the hierarchies within the collection. And, one step further, the artist's work in the exhibition acts as a narrative vehicle – it helps to elucidate the object, to introduce a new optic or metaphor. If an artist decides to work on a particular area of the collection, then a selection he or she has made of certain objects is brought into the laboratory. After four weeks, perhaps a phrase, an element of a sentence, begins to develop. And that conceptual, emergent moment can lead to a particular combination of form and content and ultimately – a prototype. That prototype is actually on a par with the collection itself. Because the collection of ethnographic material is itself a collection of prototypes. The prototype is something that is unfinished, something that is being worked on, that has not yet been resolved. The ethnographic objects aren't finished and the work that I ask an artist to do is also only in its early phases – and it's unfinished as well. The conflation of the two unfinished collections, artifacts and conceptual interpretations nurtures a new way of looking at the collection as a whole. In other words, when we exhibit these unfinished collections, those that are produced by the engagement of artists and the old ethnographic materials themselves, the public finds a new path into the museum, which they can use to model their own interpretations. The artist becomes a facilitator, an interpreter, providing a new optic and new words with which to describe these objects. All of this opens up a present moment, suspending the anachronism which bedevils these collections; this 'out-of-timeliness' is shaken off giving them a contemporary presence. For me, artists are particularly astute poachers – they are very good at working in different disciplines and are able to challenge the canon of museum anthropology. It is an institutional critique but not a safe, passive area of criticism. It's a practice that leads to the production of ideas and sometimes of objects.

JS: Could you define the term 'post-ethnographic museum' which you apply to the Weltkulturen Museum?

CD: The 'post-ethnographic museum' engages with a reflexive, critical and creative understanding of its own institutional history and status. I have – both personally

and discursively – a lot of problems with the idea that this kind of museum today should represent and mediate ethnic identifications through material objects. The museum, which is located in Europe in a country with a colonial past, has to be open to interpretations that come from different parts of the world and that challenge the geopolitical rigidity of ethnicity or of the colonial demarcation of cultures from the past.

JS: How do you deal with claims for restitution of artifacts to their source communities?

CD: It's very complicated. One important way of dealing with the problem of restitution is by building organic links to institutions in those countries. By inviting artists and also by setting up a young curators programme which we have been running since one year, we can open up the storage spaces and allow curators from different source communities to work with the collection. The issue of restitution has recently been debated in the work of Luke Willis Thompson in 'Foreign Exchange'. In a very intelligent way, his work shows that restitution throws out

a kind of geographical essentialism. In other words, if you send objects that were collected in the 19th century back to the countries today, you may find that a source community resides in these countries, but the larger diaspora lives elsewhere. So if you want to send Fijian objects back to Fiji, what do you do about Fijians who are in London? How do you come to terms with the shifts: where people live; the relationship between land and temporality that the notion of the source community or indigeneity suggests? In his new book *Returns*, James Clifford claims that 'indigeneity' is something that is based on land and time. However, he suggests there should be a conflation between diaspora politics and indigeneity, because in that way you bring in translation which is uneven – you can add complexity to the question of the roots, of the source, of the original community. You allow it to move, you allow different kinds of repatriation and return to take place. Conceptually, restitution or repatriation have to be analysed in a really thorough manner. They can't be allowed to preserve a kind of essentialism which would continue to perpetrate the logos of ethnos. We often get visits by researchers from Australia regarding sacred secret objects which can't be exhibited, but which we look after.



Installation view *Object Atlas*. Work by Otobong Nkanga. Photo: Wolfgang Günzel

The clear decision that they should be sent back is never made, because it's not apparent where they should be sent back to. When one isn't careful, these objects could land quickly on the tribal art markets in Belgium or in Paris.

Footnotes

1 The Weltkulturen Museum was founded in 1904 by the citizens of Frankfurt. It holds a unique collection of 67,000 ethnographic artifacts from Oceania, Africa, South East Asia as well as from North, South and Central America. This is complemented by a picture archive of some 120,000 historical and contemporary ethnographic photos and films.